Trust is a delicate flower that needs to get nurtured and time to grow. Even more so love. A tale of two disparate Wardens forced together, of finding a way to overcome the distrust, and their own painful past in the time of the Blight. Very in-depth, character-focused exploration of the Dalish origin/warden, and of all DA:O companions during the Fifth Blight. Follows and expands on canon events; AU in some ways. Multiple POV's and pairings.

This is a COMPLETELY new rewritten and revised version of my story, originally posted on Fanfiction.net. Please see the individual chapter notes for more informations about what
had been changed. Tags and Rating are subject to change and will get updated with its further progress.

Notes

My labor of love of seven years of writing on FFN. I always wanted to bring this story over to ao3, but after consideration of how old the original, first chapters are, I didn't feel comfortable to leave/post them as they are right now. Thus I decided to do a complete rewrite of the first original 30-40 chapters, and afterwards will revise/edit the other chapters in a way I see more fitting to the vision I have now of this story and its characters.

This will be far more than just a simple rehashing of game events. I'll give the Dalish origin and Warden and all her companions more substance and depth with lots of added (and canon divergence) scenes, and more extensive/in depth-dialogue. I'm a very character-focused writer, who likes to take things slow but steady. No matter if it is character development, or the relationships to each character. It all makes it more realistic, imo.

So buckle up as you return with me to Dragon 9:30- this is going to be a looooong story :)

- Inspired by Of Elves And Humans by Merilsell (Yours truly)
This chapter is now finally beta read. Many thanks to heffalumps for her help :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*~Home is behind
The world ahead
And there are many paths to tread
Through shadow
To the edge of night
Until the stars are all alight...~*
- Pippin; LotR, Return of the king
Ostagar was brimming with hectic activity.

People rushed back and forth in between the widespread mass of tents, barking orders at servants and soldiers alike. The sound intermingled with the metallic clang of swords clashing and grunts of exertion of men and women testing their skills against each other.

Trails of green leaves mixed with scarlet upon cracked white stone hushed aside whenever a messenger rushed from one place to another. Placed amidst nature as the ancient tevinter ruins were, it was no surprise to find evidence of a waning summer here, instead of only cold, splintered stone. After all, its strategic placement at the edge of the Korcari Wilds was the reason why the
ruin still existed and why they all were here for the upcoming battle.

Dressed in the heavy armor set of standard Warden uniform, Alistair tried to ignore the commotion around him. Between two sets of crumbling stone pillars and under the warmth of the midday sun, he had found his own little place of respite. It was far from being quiet here, and yet a vast improvement from the boisterous volume of the main Warden camp. Besides, he needed time away from them to lick his wounds, or more like his wounded pride. His fellow Warden – a gruff city elf from Gwaren named Deyron – had sent him down on his ass more times during their long sparring match than he cared to count.

Damn these weaselly, dexterous rogues with their stabbing knives and daggers everywhere! They already had one weapon more than him to stab someone with, so, to even out the chances, they should at least be forced to slow down during a fight. Of course, no one had told Deyron that before their match. The elf, despite being half his height, had bestowed upon him a beautiful collection of arse bruises, which would turn a simple task such as sitting down into a painful ordeal for the next couple of days. Alistair snorted, wryly amused at his own predicament. After all, the sparring match had been his idea to begin with, to work on the shortcomings of his training he still needed to iron out. Especially when it came to facing dual-wielding, stabby rogues, which had turned out just as well as he'd thought in the end. At least killing darkspawn would be more forward in the upcoming battle - or so he hoped.

"Hey, doll."

Speaking of stabby rogues, one of them stood propped against the adjutant wall, his body turned toward the unfortunate female soldier next to him. Daveth was one of the recruits Duncan had found earlier, though Alistair wasn't quite sure what his mentor had seen in him. It couldn't have been his smug sense of superiority nor his lack of respect for women, that was certain.

"Wanna release some tension before the battle?" 

As far across the area as they were from where he sat, Alistair couldn't see the woman's expression. If she was cringing even half as hard as he was at Daveth’s words, this conversation wouldn't last long.

"Oh yes, sure," she said. Her ensuing laughter was bright, friendly.

Wait, what? Alistair blinked. That… worked? He'd never understand women – oh. Still reeling from the unexpected turn of events, he nearly missed the resounding slap Daveth received.

"Thank you. I feel much less tense already," he heard the woman say as she turned around and stormed away, leaving a dumbfounded Daveth behind.

Shit. He shouldn't laugh, he really really shouldn't - especially since his aptitude for flirting was virtually non-existent. Alistair coughed to stifle said laugh and hid his grin behind a hand - with questionable success. The female soldier had stormed off toward his general direction. When she passed Alistair, within his secluded spot, their eyes met. Noticing his amusement, she smiled at him.

Alistair sputtered as he quickly glanced away, the heat rising in his cheeks. Still fixating on the ground, he took several stabilizing breaths, peeved with his inability to even look at a woman without turning into a beet-red, bumbling idiot. Maker, would this ever get easier?

Lost in thought as he was, he didn't notice the hulking figure approaching him. Only as the person blocked out the sun with their sheer mass, he blinked up at them, recognizing his fellow Warden.
"Oh hi, Junan. Nice of you to worry that I don't get sunburned. You know, my skin is so sensitive."

The bulky man raised one black, bushy eyebrow. "Makes sense for you to sit in the midday sun, then."

"Oh, that," Alistair replied in the same snarky tone. "Yes, I was hoping to develop a tan before the battle to look good, but alas..." Leaving the sentence hanging, he pointed at his naturally brown skin.

That elicited a deep chuckle out of the paler man. "What are you doing here, Junior?"

Maker, how he hated that nickname. With a bit of luck he could finally pass it on to the other recruits soon. "Enjoying the sun, until you came along, obviously." Alistair shot him a crooked grin and made a nod toward where Daveth stood. "Also watching the recruits, as is my task as junior member of the Order."

Junan's green eyes flitted over to the momentarily miserable rogue and quickly grasped the situation. "Maker's breath, he tried it again?"

"Yes." The laugh Alistair had suppressed before escaped his throat now. He shrugged a bit. "I'm not sure what Duncan saw in him, to be honest."

"You tell me, Junior. The first time the guy was in our camp he'd tried to pickpocket me."

"What?" Alistair looked up at him, eyes wide. "And still you haven't ripped him apart with your bare hands. Wonders never cease."

"Only because I respect the commander's decision too much and need my strength for the upcoming battle." Junan sighed and drove a large hand through his short-cropped dark hair. "But at least he isn't as stuck up as that knight, Jory. If I have to hear about his wife one more time..."

"Oh, jealous, are we?"

He snorted. "Hardly. Nothing wrong with seeking fleeting diversion, but attachments like that are only a hindrance to who we are and what we do, you know?"

"Yeah..." Alistair agreed, but his heart wasn't in it. Not that he minded when his Grey Warden brothers sought out, well, *temporary company*, but it simply wasn't something for him. With this life, it was probably foolish to hope for something... deeper than that, though he couldn't help hoping anyway. "Wait." He narrowed his eyes at the involuntary shade provider next to him. "Didn't you have a girl in Denerim?"

"One?" Junan laughed. "Please. One woman is not enough to handle..." He made a sweeping motion over his armored, muscular frame. "... all this."

"Alright." Alistair let his head fall into his gloved hand with a groan. "Forget I asked."

"However, I'm not an ass and am upfront with the girl about it. So she knows exactly what she is agreeing to when-"

"I get it, okay." His tone was harsher than intended, which only added to the new blush spreading across his face. "Spare me the details."

"Whoa, no need to get so defensive, Junior. After all, you asked me, remember?"
Alistair's anger deflated with a sigh. "I know, sorry. It is just-

"Did Benson and Pirian tease you again for what happened in Denerim?" Junan exhaled with a shake of his head. "Maker, they act as if they were never your age and inexperienced. I told them to drop it, since it is your choice whether or not to spend the night -"

"Yes, I remember." How could he forget the night where his fellow Wardens lured him into the Pearl under false pretenses? Fade take him, he didn't even know what that place was before. Sure, they had… odd decoration for a tavern, and the women sitting at their table seemed especially fixated on complimenting his appearance. As soon as his fellow Wardens confessed their plan to hook him up with one of them and told him what this place really was (no broth there, none at all), Alistair had bolted into the night, red-faced. The humiliation of the whole situation still gave him nightmares. Well, that and darkspawn.

"I think that, in their own twisted way, they wanted to give you a treat before we had to leave for Ostagar."

Alistair shifted in his stony seat, which only served to remind him of all the bruises forming on his backside. "Um, yeah. I’d prefer a book or a plate of cheese then, instead, thank you very much. Or those tiny Orlesian sweets packed in colorful wraps? I would have taken those too." He frowned at him. "But gifting a woman like a piece of meat? That is all kinds of wrong!"

"The possibility to spend the night with her, not the woman herself, more like." Junan halted with a shudder as a harsh gust of wind hit his pale skin. Ah, yes, Ferelden's legendary brisk weather in action, even in the late summer. Wonderful. High above a vast, stretching forest and close to the Korcari Wilds as they were, the air changed constantly between cold and stuffy. Especially the nights could be uncomfortable and nigh frigid with the howling of the wind in between the cracked stones of the ruins. "Look, Alistair," Junan said, patting him on the shoulder. "No one expects you to run after everything with two legs and tits like Daveth does. That is simply not you..."

"Oh, thank you for your vote of confidence."

"... But if you never even try to talk to women, you'll never find out what you like," Junan finished, despite the sarcastic interruption.

"Oooor maybe there are simply more important things going on right now than my non-existing success with women. Like… oh, I don't know, the upcoming battle against the darkspawn horde approaching Ostagar? And all the talk about it being a Blight?"

"Right." He audibly exhaled. "Back to business, then?"

"I'd prefer that, to be honest," Alistair nodded. "I will still have enough time to make an ass out of myself in between killing darkspawn, don't you worry." He made a face. "Besides, I already had my fair share of that today."

"You mean your sparring match against Deyron?"

"More like the fail thereof."

"Is that why you are out here instead back at camp?" Junan laughed out, then shrugged with his broad shoulders. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Junior. That guy is vicious with his blades. Even took me a few years to best him, so you still got a lot of time to do so - and get better when facing dual wielding rogues. You are young, and you are a fast learner. You will get there, believe me."

"Somehow you sound much more like Duncan than six years my senior right now..." Alistair
grinned at his fellow Warden, actually relieved and pleased to be hearing encouragements instead of being teased, for once. While it was all done in a friendly, companionable way by his fellow Wardens, and not at all viciously like some boys did it back in Redcliffe or in the Chantry, it could still be grating at times. "But thanks. Speaking of him, have you heard anything about when Duncan will return from recruiting, well, the third recruit?"

"You mean… like a letter?" Mirroring his grin, Junan produced a folded document out of the small satchel at his belt. "Just came with the king's raven an hour ago. It is the reason I went searching for you, actually. I knew you could use some good news after the sparring gone wrong."

"Aww, you are too good to me..." Showing him a genuine smile, Alistair took the proffered letter to read it, feeling nearly giddy at the prospect. Unfolding it, he saw that Duncan's otherwise clear handwriting was scrawled, the words brief and choppy as if hastily written down. Not only was that odd, but he had obviously also changed his plans. He frowned up at Junan. "Didn't Duncan want to return to Highever or Denerim to search for another recruit?"

"Yes, I think so." His fellow Warden nodded and tilted his head. "Odd that he got stuck halfway in the Brecilian Forest, of all places, huh?"

"There is something written about a 'tainted mirror' he'd found in a cave, but he doesn't elaborate on that. Only that a Dalish hunter from a nearby clan got in contact with it." Alistair’s frown deepened. "Huh, didn't know that mirrors could contain the taint. Or any other random object, for that matter. Is this going to be a thing now?" He grimaced. "Please say no."

Junan heaved his shoulders in a shrug. His massive armor creaked with the motion. "In all my years of being a Warden, I have never heard of such a thing. Must be Tevinter then, because, you know, all the bad shit originates from there."

"At least that is what the Chantry tells us," Alistair remarked offhandedly, his tone wry.

He grinned at him. "Well, you tell me. After all, you are the expert here, templar boy."

"Ugh, don't remind me. Six months later and I can still sometimes hear the Grand Cleric yelling in my ear. To this day, I still wonder how Duncan and I left her study in one piece." He focused back on the letter. "It also says that we should prepare the Joining, so it can start almost immediately after their return." Stopping his eyes wandered over the last written part again. "Wait… their return? Does that mean..."

"... the third recruit is Dalish?" Junan finished in his stead. "Yes, though if the mirror was indeed tainted and the hunter came in contact with it-"

"... then he is already tainted?" It would explain why Duncan wanted to conduct the Joining right away. "How can the hunter survive the entire way back?"

He snorted. "How the fuck should I know, Junior? I'm not exactly what you would call an expert regarding the Dalish. Though if the hunter arrives here, still standing on two feet after the forced march back, I say he has a good chance..." Leaning in, he lowered his voice. "... to also survive the Joining."

"Yeah..." Alistair uttered, lost in thought. The memory of his own Joining was still very fresh and vivid in his mind, and it wasn't something he relished remembering. Sure, it did mark the beginning of his new life, complete with freedom from the Chantry, yet he would have gladly missed watching how one of the recruits choked to death upon drinking the darkspawn blood. Maybe the Dalish would be luckier. After all, if the hunter could survive days of forced marching
while being tainted, it meant he possessed a great deal of willpower and constitution. "I guess you are right."

"Of course I am." His bellowing laugh nearly got swallowed by the increasing noise of the people scurrying around them. Suddenly, the wind picked up, causing Alistair to shiver with its briskness. It howled in between the brittle stone and added to the overall volume of the area. "As for the Joining, Warden Constable Gable is dealing with the preparations. As soon as he's pulled the stick out of his ass far enough to be able to walk over to the mage encampment, that is. You know how he is." Junan shuddered, though the wind nor cold were the cause.

Right, that man was even more by-the-book than the most pious people back at the monastery. Nor had he any inkling what the word humor even meant. Needless to say, he and Alistair didn't exactly... get along well. All the more a reason to hope for Duncan's swift return, then. "At least you didn't try to argue or joke with him. Maker, I really thought he would wiggle his finger and turn me in a toad when I talked back to him yesterday."

Junan made a face. "Bad idea, Junior. Unless you like hours-long lectures about duty."

"Yeah, I already had ten years of that before the Wardens. So, no, thanks."

"Right." Junan shuffled on his feet, seeming eager to get moving. "Wanna go back to our camp and grab a bite to eat, then?"

Alistair hesitated, uncertain if he wanted to return there just yet. Then again, the king's troops’ midday drill had just started not far from him, filling his respite with the noisy sound of clatter of armor and shouts. "Okay. What about... him, though?" He asked and pointed at Daveth.

"Eh, he can get his own food, as soon he is done... doing his thing." Huffing, he leaned in toward Alistair with a slight grin. "I have the feeling that if the Joining doesn't kill him, one of the women here will, for sure."

"That's... reassuring," Alistair quipped and stood up to roll his shoulders. He disliked the faint strain in his muscles and only hoped it wouldn't develop into a full ache later on. Remembering he still held the letter in his hands, he folded it and offered it back to his fellow Warden.

"Ah, no, keep it, Junior." When Alistair was ready to leave, Junan turned to him, chuckling. "I took it when Gable wasn't looking."

"Greeeaat," he drawled in a sarcastic tone, steering toward their enclosed camp in the southern area of Ostagar with Junan in tow. "Whatever could go wrong with that, I wonder? Just so you know, if he tries to turn me into a toad for this, I'll duck and cover behind you."

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It took four more days to hear word of Duncan again. A scout had sighted him and the recruit at the outer perimeter of the Wilds, which meant he would arrive in an hour or two.

"That is good news, indeed. And about time as well, since I can feel the darkspawn closing in." Standing straight, Gable nodded sternly at the even smaller elf in front of him. "Tell the mages to
prepare for the Joining. I will aid them in their task as soon as I am able."

The scout, a spindly archer, gaped at the Warden Constable for a brief moment before backing away. "R-right away, ser."

Then, Gable's gaze fell on Alistair, and he felt like shrinking under his hard stare. What the lanky elven mage lacked in height and stature he certainly evened out tenfold with his authoritative demeanor. "Alistair, go inform the king's encampment of the Commander's impending return."

"Now?" He asked, despite knowing better, and pointed to his plate filled with food. Suddenly, the popping and crackle of the campfire nearby became very loud in his ears. His fellow Wardens had stopped their chatter and instead stared at him. Everyone knew it was better not to argue with Gable, but his growling, empty stomach had momentarily overruled Alistair's sense of duty. And his sense of danger, for that matter. "Can I finish eating, at least?"

Narrowing his eyes at him, Gable made a tiny, annoyed sound at the back of his throat. "Did I not make myself clear enough?"

Right, so much for breakfast. Letting his fork clatter on the plate, Alistair stood up and put the food down. "Fine. But my breakfast better still be there when I return. I get so cranky when I am hungry, and you won't like me then."

Gable's groan made apparent that he didn't like him either way, but he tried to ignore this fact. Like the one that he'd have come face to face with Cailan to deliver the message, which was generally something he tried to avoid. Someone might get a wrong idea when seeing them side by side - or rather, the unfortunate right one. Despite being glad about hearing of Duncan's return, the prospect of meeting his estranged… What? Brother? Half-brother? … Managed to sour his mood nonetheless.

No. Alistair shook his head as he walked past the large sickbay, too occupied with his thoughts to notice the pained ramblings of the soldiers there. The term 'brother' was reserved for his fellow Wardens, because they were his family and cared for him, despite having known him for only half a year. Cailan, however, did not, nor did Alistair expect him to. There was no need to complicate matters by stepping into the king's life now. Being a Warden was what Alistair wanted, had chosen and was actually good at. Duncan said he was worthy of it joining the order, and that was all that mattered. For the first time in his life, he felt as if he belonged somewhere, and he was finally able to make his peace with the past and his heritage.

Turning the corner, he decided to take the longer way, past the ash warriors and the Mabari kennels. Alistair knew it would do little to postpone the inevitable, yet found himself adapting a slower pace. He wrinkled his nose as the wind turned and the reek of wet dog lashed out at him. As a Fereldan, he was not supposed to be bothered by it, but it also brought up childhood memories he wasn't exactly fond of. Despite his intention to dawdle, he walked faster again to pass the kennels and the memories associated with them. In the center area, a priestess held an impromptu mass for a group of soldiers. Jory was among them. Recognizing Alistair, the stout man waved to him, and he acknowledged the Warden recruit with a nod and a wan smile.

He wasn't exactly distant to him or Daveth, and had even trained with both many times over the past weeks, listened to their stories at the camp fire. It was his task as the junior member of the order to take care of them, yet was there a difference between them and his fellow Wardens. Maybe this was because Alistair had known them just for a few weeks, or perhaps this difference existed because they might still… die. He didn't want to think about that, or the impending battle against a massive darkspawn horde. Both would become inevitable in a short while, however.
Just as him arriving at the king's tent was. Stopping in front of it, Alistair gaped at its size. A garish mix of gold and crimson - the colors of the family regnant - it was at least five times larger than his own. On its entrance, two deep red Mabaris facing each other were embroidered into the closed tent flaps. Alistair recognized the symbols as part of Ferelden's coat of arms. He was surprised to notice the absence of the otherwise omnipresent guard in front of it. Inwardly, he sighed. So much for relaying the message to someone else.

He wasn't quite sure how to proceed - nor if he even wanted to. No, that he didn't want to was quite apparent, but still - what to do now? He couldn't just waltz in there, and neither could one just… knock on a tent. He shuffled on his feet and had to force himself to not turn around and run the other way. This had been a bad, baaad idea from the start. The tent flap opened before Alistair could sink further into his misery. Steel blue eyes belonging to the Teyrn fixed on him as soon Loghain had stepped out of the tent.

"What do you want?" His voice was gruff, and its sharpness nearly made him jump.

Alistair cleared his throat in an attempt to reign in his nerves and swallowed audibly. The insides of his mouth had turned dry as dust. "I… came to deliver a message." Loghain showed no reaction. His presence loomed large, and it wasn't due to the massive silverite armor he wore. In another situation, Alistair would have been delighted to meet the Hero of River Dane, of all people, but now it only felt… intimidating.

Loghain continued to stare him down for another, torturous moment, before his assessing eyes narrowed. "You are that Warden, right?"

"What, did my uniform give me away? Since he liked to be alive, Alistair bit his tongue to keep this quip from escaping. "Yes...?" he only said instead, unsure.

The Teyrn tilted his head, glowering. "Whatever business could you have with the King? Haven't your order done enough already, putting these idle fantasies into the King's head?"

Alistair was at a loss for words, which didn't happen often. Shocked to be yelled at for no reason, he only gaped dumbly at the man.

"Now, now, Loghain. No need to be rude." Cailan's blond head appeared between the tent's flaps. "My father didn't allow the Wardens back into Ferelden so that you could yell at them. They are here at my behest and are to be seen as equal to the crown for the battle."

"As you wish, Your Majesty," Loghain sighed. Every bit of his posture said that he was loathe to back down. It was no surprise, then, when he turned a final time before walking away with his guard in tow. "But perhaps you are putting too much faith in these Wardens, Your Majesty."

Cailan didn't reply and waited until Loghain was out of sight. His attention shifted over to Alistair, and his open and friendly expression brightened further. "Ho there, friend." Alistair winced at being addressed by… him. "Come on in."

Blinking blankly at the king, he mentally spurred himself into replying. "Oh, no. No. That won't be necessary, er, Your Majesty."

Hearing that, Cailan stepped out of his tent and closer to him. He was half a head shorter than himself and paler, Alistair distantly noted. The king smiled and made a polite but assertive sweeping motion toward the tent. "I insist, Warden. I heard you have a message for me. Such things are better not to be discussed out here in the open."
Well, shit. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't just turn and bolt from the literal King of Ferelden. And if he did, Gable would kill him with a snap of his fingers for failing to follow his orders. Twitchy, angry mages? Never good. Feeling like he was being thrown into a hungry horde of darkspawn without a weapon, Alistair ducked into the tent with the King following suit. His… half-brother. He tried really hard not to think about that fact and failed in the attempt.

Cailan gently pushed past him while he busied himself marveling at the sheer space and luxury the insides of his tent provided. It was probably not comparable to the King's palace in Denerim, he imagined, but it had a high pallet draped in satin and fur coverlets, and some carved, wooden furniture. Flowing, light silk drapes and heraldry in the royal colors adorned the thin walls and ceiling and somehow stayed in place there. Carefully rolled maps and parchments were stored at the far end of the tent, while a few were still strewn about on the table in its center.

The creaking of armor snapped Alistair back to attention. Cailan rolled his shoulders and grimaced. "Maker, how do you wear this heavy armor all day, Warden?"

He shuffled on his feet, flustered. "I'm… used to it, Your Majesty. Years of training and all that."

"Ah." The King smiled. "But of course. The Wardens recruit only the best, so that makes sense." Walking over to the small shelf serving as a cabinet, he uncorked a crystalline decanter and gave it a whiff before filling his glass half-full with red wine. "I'm aware appearance matters greatly as a king, for it raises morale in camp. Which is why I have to wear this blasted armor all day." He turned, motioning for Alistair to sit down in an upholstered chair in the corner.

"I… um, would remain standing, if that is, er, okay… Your Majesty." Unlike his own cramped tent, Cailan's was spacious enough in height that he actually could stand comfortably here.

"Suit yourself." Shrugging a bit, Cailan plopped himself down on his lavish bed and took a sip of his wine. He relaxed his posture, as far as his heavy, golden-plated armor allowed him to do so. With a sigh, he released the remaining tension within and looked up at him. "What is your name, Warden?"

He blinked, but remembered to answer him shortly after. "... Alistair, Your Majesty."

"Alistair, huh?" The King mused over that for a moment and made an odd sound at the back of his throat. "A good name. A strong name. Besides… Cailan is enough within these walls. Thin as they may be."

"I..." Alistair felt dread sinking into his stomach, leaden like iron. Maker's breath, the King knew who he was. There was no doubt left now. And how could he not? Looking at Cailan was like looking in a mirror and seeing a blonder, paler version of himself. "I'm expected to report back soon," he managed. A white lie, though much better than giving into the strong impulse to storm out of here and run into the Korcari Wilds, never to return.

"Hmm," Cailan hummed, swirling the contents of his glass around. "I see. I won't keep you long then, Alistair." His eyes meet his own and locked on, deep blue contrasting with hazel. The corners of his mouth twitched. "But you still haven't told me the message you're meant to deliver, you know?"

"Right." Alistair let out a breath and pressed his hands to his sides to stop them from shaking. "Duncan, our Warden Commander, has been sighted in the outer bounds of the Korcari Wilds. He is expected to return to Ostagar in about an hour or two."

Cailan laughed brightly. "Oh, these are fantastic news indeed. So we can fight side by side in the
battle tomorrow, after all. Glorious. I was beginning to worry he'd miss out on all the fun."

"Fun?" Alistair's eyebrows shot up. He'd only faced darkspawn once so far, and there was nothing fun about that.

"Oh, you must think me a fool, Alistair," he said, equally good-natured, shaking his head. "But I truly believe we can stop the darkspawn here once and for all." He smiled at him. "Together."

Alistair forced himself to smile back, yet felt his eyebrows creasing to a frown. No, fool would be too harsh a word to describe his notion. A bit too optimistic, perhaps. Maker knew they would need Loghain's tactical expertise to make a difference in the battle. "No, I don't think you are, er, sire. C-cailan. Fun is just the last very thing that comes to my mind regarding darkspawn and a possible Blight."

"I'm not even sure if this is a true Blight at all. There are plenty darkspawn in the field, but, alas, there have been no signs of an archdemon so far."

"Yeah, such pity, that," he muttered under his breath and coughed to cover up his words.

"I was simply hoping for a war like in the tales." Cailan sighed, sounding way too enthusiastic about the matter. "A king riding side by side with the fabled Grey Wardens against a tainted god… but I suppose this will have to do."

Alistair's eyebrows jumped up again, as he stared at the king. How was he supposed to react to that? Sarcasm? Honesty? At a loss for… anything, he stayed silent. Well… most of him did, anyway. As the silence stretched between them, his treacherous stomach decided to rumble its protest regarding the severe lack of food so far. Loudly. Great, this wasn't awkward at all.

Cailan chuckled at that. "You haven't eaten yet, Alistair?"

He wanted the Maker to strike him down this instant. "N-no?"

"Then come, stay. I happened to miss out on breakfast too, due to Loghain boring me with his strategy all morning."

"I couldn't possibly.-"

"Yes, you can." Standing up, he ducked halfway out of the tent to order his guards to bring two servings of breakfast. Oh. Returning, he motioned Alistair to follow him. "Come, sit with me, Alistair. You haven't told me yet if Duncan has managed to find another recruit, or where you got your weapon training from. I am always eager to hear stories of the Grey Wardens."

"I… Fine." Realizing quickly that he had no choice but to comply, Alistair slinked after his in more than one way strange half-brother of a king. Suddenly, getting turned into a toad by Gable seemed way more favorable a prospect than… this.

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"Where have you been for so long?"
Alistair had returned to the Warden encampment after the most awkward breakfast of his life only to get yelled at by Gable. This day just kept getting better and better.

*Dining with the king whilst answering all kind of invasive questions about my life.* Alistair was certain this reply would go over perfectly with the Warden Constable, even if it was the truth. He could practically taste the electric currents Gable was about to shock him with. "The king had quite a few… additional questions," he said instead, settling for a half-truth. "I can hardly deny a royal request, can I?" Ugh, again with the challenging tone. When would he learn *not* to do that?

Gable's dark eyes glinted with anger, his already thin lips pressed in an even finer line. His sharp intake of air, a preparation to launch the tirade he must have been planning for the entire hour Alistair was gone was interrupted by an elderly woman appearing before him. Alistair blinked at the displaced guest in their midst, but more so at the chantry attire she wore. Long grey hair meticulously tucked into a bun, the woman placed her hands on her hips. With a proud, unyielding poise, her stern gaze focused on Gable. "Are you the one in command here?"

It was rare to see a hard-headed person like Gable falter, least of all struggle for words. Even more rare was to see his behavior mirrored in another. Getting no answer, or not getting one quickly enough for her taste, she whirled around to face Alistair. *Uh-oh. "You!"

He winced at the force of her voice, suddenly feeling fifteen and back at the chantry again, about to be scolded. Alistair stood up straighter to show confidence that he definitely didn’t feel. "Y-yes?"

"I need you to find Uldred, the mage leader here in Ostagar, and tell him that I require his presence."

His mouth once again ran more quickly than his brain did. "And you can't do this yourself? You need a *Grey Warden* for this?" As soon the words were spoken aloud, he winced again. One day this would be his undoing, for sure.

Despite being significantly shorter than he was, the woman still had no problem staring him down. Coming closer, she poked his armored chest, her voice clipped and demanding. "As the Revered Mother, young man, I have no time to spare to run after mages. And the reason he must come see me is in the interest of your order as well. Otherwise, I would have gone to the next servant to see it done."

Alistair backed away from her and nearly tumbled into a tent. Stabilizing himself, he resigned with a sigh. "Fine, Your Reverence." What was it with today and people with titles ordering him around and sending him on errands? "I'll see if I can find him."

"No." The Revered Mother shook her head and glared at him. "You will find him. Not maybe, not if. Ask the mage camp where he is. I'm certain they will provide you with information on his whereabouts." She pushed past the throng of men that had crept closer to the spectacle as it unfolded and left without another look at Alistair or Gable.

Great. Walking into a camp full of mages. After the awkward hour spent with his half-brother, the King, this would be just another highlight in Alistair's day. Well, at least when enduring the most stilted family reunion ever, there had been food, and lots of it. So, if he was going to be killed by the mage leader due to his templar background, he wouldn't have to die on an empty stomach.

At least there was that silver lining.
Though he never had been there, the mage encampment in Ostagar was easy to find. Alistair simply needed to follow the trail of grim-looking templars and people in garish robes. Finding someone willing to speak to him was another matter, however.

The templars there eyed him as distrustfully as if he were a mage, and the mages looked at him as if they knew of his templar training by appearance alone. They did their best to either ignore or gossip about the displaced visitor in their midst. Alistair had last felt this uncomfortable while dining with his half-brother. He had neither been keen nor expecting to relive this experience so quickly. Then again, discomfort seemed to be his theme for the day. Wonderful. Walking past yet another giggling pair of young women watching him, he saw an elderly woman seated on a log near their campfire. Unlike the Revered Mother, she had no hard edges, and appeared downright… grandmotherly in comparison. Absorbed as she was in the book she was reading, she only noticed his approach when he was nearly standing in front of her.

Blue eyes blinked up at him and her gray eyebrow shot up, amused. "Are you lost, young man? This is not the Warden encampment, in case you have forgotten that."

"Um," Alistair winced, not having been expecting to be teased by her, of all the people here. Maybe she wasn't so grandmotherly, after all.

Putting her book aside and smoothing out the wrinkles of her red robe with her hands, the mage chuckled. "But where are my manners? Can I help you… um?"

"Alistair," he said, relieved to find her more agreeable to speak with him.

"Nice to meet you, Warden." She nodded, a small smile on her lips."My name is Wynne. I am the Senior Enchanter of Ferelden's Circle. What do you need of the mages? If this is about the Joining then..."

"No, no," Alistair rushed to correct her. He let out a shaky breath before continuing to speak. Despite her… mellow appearance, talking to mages always made him nervous. "But I'm searching for a fellow… colleague of yours, I guess?"

"Uldred?" Wynne said flatly, and her smile vanished. "Ah, our ambitious leader, yes." With the way she spoke these words, it sounded far more like disdain than admiration. "He is not present in camp right now, I fear. However, you will most likely find him to the east, up the ramp and into the secluded area of Ostagar, where your order wanted the Joining to be prepared. He is aiding with the last preparations there, as far as I am aware."

Alistair's face brightened. He knew exactly what place she meant and felt eager to get there before the mage could leave there again. "Thank you… Wynne. You saved me a lot of time with that information."

"Not a problem at all, young man." Nodding, her lips curved upwards again, as she added, "as for his appearance, simply keep your eyes peeled for a human man looking astonishingly akin to a rat
or a weasel. Just without any fur."

"Err... okay?" While it wasn't his place to comment on the obvious dislike between them, he laughed at that. "Thank you again." With that, he turned and left in the direction Wynne had described.

Alistair found Uldred quickly after that, thanks to Wynne's words and colorful description.

Walking up the ramp, the secluded area was larger than he remembered it to be. Sunlight flooded its aged, white stone floor and the tall pillars encasing the place etched their shadows into the ground. The mage had his back turned to him and seemed to be too busy with sorting items on a stone slab to notice him.

However, Alistair was far from being short and thus his large shadow falling onto the mage give his approach away. "What is it now? Haven't the Grey Wardens asked more than enough of the Circle?" His voice was cold, annoyed. Through its nasal tone, it also had a somewhat grating note.

"Huh?" Alistair mused, carefully stepping closer to the man's lean back. "How did you know that I'm a Warden?"

"Because it is always your order that demands more!" As Uldred turned around, he had to confess that Wynne hadn't been exaggerating about his looks earlier. He did share a certain resemblance to said animals, wizened and, well, weaselly, as he looked. However, underneath the hard lines of his scowl was an unmistakable intelligence. More importantly, Alistair's templar-trained senses screamed with the abundance of his magic. He felt a sudden intense flight or fight response and had to mentally will himself to stay in place. Uldred scoffed at his inaction. "Did you simply come up here to stare at me, Warden?"

"No, actually," Alistair put his chin up and felt himself revert back to the familiar pattern of sarcasm. In any given situation, whether humorous or not - especially when not - this was his first weapon of choice. "I came here to deliver a message, ser mage." Uldred raised a thin, questioning eyebrow, waiting for him to elaborate. Alistair hesitated, fully aware of the impact his words would have. He liked being human and not a frog, after all. "The Reverend Mother desires your presence."

The effect was almost immediate. Uldred's face twisted in disgust. "What her Reverence 'desires' is no concern of mine. I am busy helping the Grey Wardens — by your order's request, I might add," he yelled into his face before waving him off.

The dismissal annoyed Alistair more than it angered him, causing his tone to grow even more sardonic. "Should I have asked her to write a note?" He asked, knowing full well how challenging it sounded. Alistair idly wondered if he would live to see the end of this day in human form, but a huge defiant part of him simply didn't care.

"Tell her I will not be harassed in this manner."

What? His eyes narrowed on the man, not backing down from this odd spiral of escalation. It was too late for that, anyway. "Yes, how rude of me. I was harassing you by delivering a message."

Behind him, Alistair could hear light-footed steps and became aware of the presence of yet another
person being here. Which was odd, too, since this area was normally closed off to servants. For the moment, he was too focused on this stubborn and infuriating mage in front of him to check the person’s identity, however.

"Your glibness does you no credit," Uldred spat, clearly at the fringes of his patience.

"Aww..." Maker, Alistair what are you doing? a small voice in his head warned him, but still he could not help but rile the mage even more. "... and here I thought we were getting along so well. I was even going to name one of my children after you... the grumpy one."

There was a long-drawn annoyed groan from the person behind him, sounding distinctively... feminine? Before he had time to turn, the mage spoke up again, with finality. "Enough! I will speak to the woman if I must." Uldred darted forward and shoved him aside. "Out of my way, fool!"

And then he was gone, finally giving Alistair a chance to quench his curiosity about the person looming at his back. Silly as it was, he felt victorious about having managed to fulfill this task. The sour-faced mage would now seek out the Revered Mother, despite all his reluctance and stubbornness. A large grin tugged at his lips as he slowly turned around to, well, her, he guessed.

"You know one good thing about the Blight is -" Alistair froze, in both words and motion, and stared.

The person, an elven woman, stared back at him, equally silent, but also... challenging. There was blood in her long blond hair, Alistair distantly noted. Dark blood that sang to his veins and reeked of taint. Some of it covered her pale, freckled cheeks as well. What had instantly forced him into silence, however, had been her eyes and the way she looked at him. Maker, the color of her eyes must have been the deepest green he'd ever seen. More than that, her gaze was perceptive and keen, and Alistair felt himself shrinking under its sharpness. This woman was no fool, that much was already obvious. Nor a servant, either. That was impossible with the proud, unyielding way she bore herself in front of him, gloved hands held at her sides. Clad in leather armor tinted forest green, two long and curved daggers were belted at her hips. Oh. His gaze flicked to her forehead, recognizing the golden-brown swirling lines of a tattoo underneath the blood.

Oh.

The recruit. The Dalish... was a woman. Alistair swallowed thickly. Not that he minded, far from it. It was just so not what he'd expected when reading Duncan's letter. She was simply so... little? Okay, maybe not that little, seeing as her head reached up to his chest. And while she was slender, as elves usually were, she obviously had a toned... figure, which spoke of regular training. Maker's breath, did he really stare at her figure just now? She must think him a drooling lecher. He mentally kicked himself into action to end this weird... impasse. "- how it brings people together," was all he managed, however, before falling silent again.

Her eyes narrowed, and she started to glare instead of stare at him. It made him want to run away, dig a hole and never come out again. Without breaking eye contact, she wiped impatiently at the sweat and blood on her forehead with the back of her hand, only to spread its smear further. She let out an annoyed sigh and swayed a little on her feet. She was also breathing audibly now, a harsh rhythm of in- and outtakes of air.

He suddenly remembered what Duncan had written about the Dalish hunter already being tainted and felt like kicking himself. Again. The blood on her body wasn't what sang to him, it was the blood in her body that did. He could feel her taint and it was jarring... To say the least. He took a step toward to her. "Are you -"

"Are you an idiot?" She cut into his words and passed out right after.
Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

Um, everything? This is a complete newly written chapter from the scratch, shifting the focus away from Lenya and toward Ostagar, because this is where the plot takes place, after all. Also I wanted to write the first chapter from Alistair's pov since ages and thus I seized the chance for a(n already) more solid characterization than what I did in the starting chapters of the original. The next chapter will be (mainly) told from Lenya's pov, so we will finally get to know her better ;)

Kudos, and especially comments are most appreciated.
Alistair is left to deal with an unconscious, feverish dalish woman, who also happens to be the third and final warden recruit. Aid is obviously needed and up to him to find it. Later then, when Lenya wakes up, she finds herself in the world outside of her clan....and has the worst possible time.

This chapter is now beta read. Thanks again to my favorite owl and fellow writer heffalumps for her invaluable help <3

Alistair had often heard of women swooning at men’s feet, even imagined what it would be like if it happened to him. This, however, was not like his imaginings.

He caught the Dalish before she could hit the ground; he now stood, helpless and alone, in the most secluded part of Ostagar, with the woman who had called him an idiot half-propped in his arms.

This day kept on giving its all to ensure he had the worst possible time.

"Um..." He looked down at her and noticed how heated her face looked. Underneath the grime and blood, her cheeks had adapted an unnatural redness that indicated fever. Come to think of it, it was a downright miracle that she'd survived as long as she had. And with no visible changes caused by the taint whatsoever. What a... mysterious woman. Alistair shook his head, letting out a self-depreciating snort at the new mess he found himself in. However, before he could wallow in the misery his day had continued to be, he needed to find help for her: a healer, perhaps. It was his job to take care of the Warden recruits, after all, though this was not at all what he'd imagined falling under the terminology of 'taking care'.

Trying not to think too much about it, he lifted her up into his arms and secured her there. Slowly, he walked down the ramp, one gauntleted hand under her knees and the other cradling and stabilizing her head and neck. He was surprised by how... light she was. Regardless, walking with another person in his arms was all but easy. Especially since, once he had returned to the livelier part of Ostagar again, he nearly ran into Benson, of all people.

His fellow Warden stared at him, then at the elven woman in his arms, and back at him. He flashed him a toothy grin. "Oh my, look at you... quite the womanizer after all. No wonder you didn't want to spend the night in the Pearl, then."

"Benson, quit the crap," Alistair snapped at the burly man. "Instead, make yourself useful and go to the mage encampment. Find help. There is an elder mage named Wynne..." He trailed off as his fellow Warden stepped closer to look at the woman in his arms.
"Who is she?"

"This is the Dalish, the third recruit. She is-"

Benson's ginger mustache twitched as he pursed his lips. "... tainted." So he felt it too. Of course he did. At least this caused him to cease his stupid comments and spurred him into action. "Wynne, you said, Junior?" Alistair only nodded numbly and watched him leave, keenly aware of standing in Ostagar's main area with an unconscious woman in his arms.

It didn't take long until someone patted him on the shoulder. Alistair slowly turned around. It was the quartermaster who provided the king's troops with supplies. "What is wrong with her? Did you overwork her? Servants need rest too, you know."

"Excuse me?" Alistair felt himself getting worked up on her behalf. How could someone mistake her for a servant, clad in armor and bloodied as she was? Just because of her pointed ears? He glared at the man for his audacity. "She is a Warden recruit who just came back with Duncan. She must have strained herself too much during the journey, or otherwise she wouldn't have fainted."

"Oh." At least the bald, stocky man had the grace to look ashamed. "My mistake, then."

"Yes," Alistair hissed out between gritted teeth. "Your mistake, indeed."

"Look, I don't want trouble, especially not with your order," the man said, wringing his hands. "So why don't you come with me? You can put her down on my cot, since she... must get heavy?"

Alistair was torn between considering the offer genuine or dubious. Besides, he was much more afraid of tripping and dropping her than of his arms getting tired. Huh, who would have thought that carrying around a gigantic silverite kite shield just about everywhere for years had such useful side-effects? But he was getting side-tracked with trivialities – it was far more important that he got her out of all these curious stares until aid arrived. Hopefully soon.

And so he followed the man who more slinked than walked back to his close by merchant stall. The place was still open, but to the side of the main area and therefore offering a bit more privacy. The quartermaster hurried to shuffle a disorderly pile of flasks and documents to the side and waved him toward the cot. "Put her down... here."

Cautiously, Alistair lay the Dalish down on the thin, rough cot next to the wooden cart. From the twist of disgust in his expression, he could see the man already was regretted his generosity. "Wait? Is this... blood?"

Alistair only shrugged."Probably? The Commander and her must have run into darkspawn on their way back, I guess."

His eyes went wide, and he shuddered. "The elf... fought darkspawn, and lived?"

He couldn't help but smile at that. "Well, she is a Warden recruit, after all."

"Right," the quartermaster breathed out. "Sorry about that, by the way. I'm just a bit on edge, with the impending battle and all. And I have sent a worker on an errand hours ago, and the damn elf still hasn't returned."

"Maybe you should have treated your worker better, then," Alistair scoffed under his breath and took off his gauntlets one by one. With a mental note to retrieve them before the man could claim and sell his gear as his own, he put them down next to the cot. Leaning over, he reached out to touch the elf’s forehand, but yanked his hand back in the last moment. Alistair inhaled shakily,
trying to calm himself by reminding himself that he had done nothing wrong. It was just to check her temperature, after all. Trying anew, he found her skin burning to his touch, causing him to frown. Damn, he could only hope that Benson would return soon with the mage. What was taking them so long, anyway?

Alistair turned to the man, who helplessly hovered at his back. "Do you have any herbs?"

"Herbs?" He blinked. "Yes, all sorts, actually. A group of soldiers brought me back a fresh batch from the Wilds. What do you need?"

"Well..." Alistair trailed off, unsure. He knew of elfroot and its healing properties, of course, but beyond that he'd never paid much attention to botany lessons in the Chantry. It hadn't been the most thrilling topic for his teenage mind, to put it mildly. Now, he regretted his inattention to the topic, since he didn't want ending up poisoning her. "Um, if you have a clean..." he stressed this word."... cloth and some cold water, that should be enough."

The stocky man nodded and briefly vanished to retrieve the desired items. Alistair looked down at the blond Dalish once again and frowned. Even more so than of her fever, he was worried about the fact that she was still unconscious, unmoving. To calm himself, he reached out to feel her pulse point, finding it thrumming a quick but steady rhythm underneath his fingertips.

"Here..." Startled at the sudden voice, Alistair yanked his hand back, as though being caught doing something naughty. Trying to curb the blush spreading across his face, he took the cloth and wooden bucket from the man.

Alistair cleared his throat. "Thank you." Dunking the cloth into the water, he began to tentatively wash the dark blood from her face. Maybe he shouldn't do this. It seemed far too invasive being so close to her unconscious form... yet he couldn't do nothing until help arrived. It just never sat well with him, seeing others in pain or need. Alistair also hoped the stark contrast between her heated skin and the cool water would cause her to stir eventually. But the Dalish remained still and sleeping, even as the water in the bucket turned black and her face was clean again – or cleaner, at least. Putting the bucket down, he breathed out, his gaze resting on her forehead a moment longer than necessary. With the blood no longer covering the skin there, he could see her whole tattoo. To him, its swirling, intertwined and dark lines looked a bit like... horns? Huh, curious. He wondered what the meaning of--

"There you are!" Hearing Benson's voice, Alistair started, feeling once more like a guilty child.

Of course, his fellow Warden noticed and bestowed upon him a knowing grin. "Already growing fond of the girl, 'eh? The Commander won't like that, Junior."

"I'm not..." Alistair protested, but the elder mage – Wynne- pushing past him interrupted any further words.

"Take your childish quarrel elsewhere, you both," she snapped, before leaning over the elven woman.

"A-aye, ma'am," Benson said, casting his blue eyes downward. Then he leaned in to Alistair and quietly added, "she is a healer, so your girl should be fine."

Alistair’s blush seared through his cheeks, and for a minute he thought his face was on fire. "She is not..." he stopped with a sigh and added in a lower, sharper voice, "you are doing this on purpose, aren't you?"
Benson only gave him a casual shrug. "Hey, I wouldn't mind calling her my fellow Warden. There aren't exactly many women around in our order right now, in case you haven't noticed."

He rolled his eyes at him. "Yeah, I bet you would like that."

"Eh, the elven gal seems a bit too young for me though. She is..." His fellow Warden grinned at him. "... much more your age."

"Ugh, you are the worst."

Benson's grin widened. "Yeah, love ya too, Junior."

"Quiet!" Wynne groused, causing Alistair and Benson to whip around to face her. "I need to concentrate."

Suddenly, the air prickled on his skin, making his fine hair stand on end. It was the telltale sign of magic being used. Well, this and the pale blue light which bloomed around the mage's hands, of course.

"M-magic, you are using magic?" The quartermaster asked, fear in his voice.

Benson scratched his head, ruffling up a few ginger strands of his long, tied-back hair. "Maybe we better take her to our camp instead?"

"I need to lower her fever first," Wynne told him, pointedly ignoring the other man. "You were right for seeking me out. She is... very ill."

Unbidden, Alistair felt his stomach twisting into way too many knots. "I know. I... felt it. The taint, I mean."

"Yes, I've heard of you Wardens being able to do that." Tilting her head, Wynne hummed quietly, while her magic flared up again. For a long moment, she remained silent as she concentrated on her task. Then, breathing out, she shook her head. "So young, still. I take it that she is Duncan's newest recruit?"

Alistair nodded. "Yes."

"I see. Now I understand his reason for rushing as much as he did to reach Ostagar. Considering how sick she is, it is a miracle she's survived the journey at all. Still..." she clucked her tongue in a disapproving manner. "I might need to have a word with your Commander, since her fever wasn't caused by her sickness alone. It was simply careless to push her so far so quickly in this condition, despite his good intentions." Another wave of healing magic disappeared into the Dalish's body through her hands.

"Will she be okay?" Benson surprised Alistair by speaking what he had been thinking."I mean, at least for now?"

Wynne wiped her brow with the sleeve of her red robe and sighed. "Yes. I managed to lower her fever, but I fear it won't last."

The Wardens shared a look, both well aware how there was now just one thing which could save or ultimately kill her – the Joining. "There is a way," Alistair said, aware of not being able to speak freely, "to, um, cure her of this sickness. You know what I mean, I think." At least he hoped she would, seeing as she had spoken of the Joining before and knew of it, in a general sense.
"Ah, yes." Recognition dawned in her pale, mellow face. "Then it had better happen sooner rather than later. Let's get her into my tent for the moment, so I can keep an eye on her condition."

Standing up and stretching her back, Wynne noticed their hesitance to move. "Well, she can hardly stay here, can she? Unless there is a tent already prepared for her in your camp, and you know which it is, of course?"

His fellow Warden smirked at him. "Maybe give her yours then, Alistair?"

He ignored his comment. "Duncan would know, but I have no idea where he is right now. So, err, your tent, then?"

"Good." The mage agreed, and her lips twitched with amusement when Alistair failed to move toward her right after. "What are you waiting for then, young man? You don't expect me to carry her there, do you?"

He blinked, staring blankly at the sleeping woman on the cot, then back at Wynne. "Err, no?"

"Want me to carry her, Junior?"

"No!" He straightened, wiping his hands on the sides of his armor to quell his nerves. "But could you take, um, my gauntlets back to camp, lest the quartermaster sells them for profit. I really don't need any darkspawn gnawing on my unprotected hands. Or worse, have Gable yell at me for not taking care of my equipment."

"Pfft, as if I would do that, Warden," the man retorted in a tone that revealed how he totally would.

"Sure thing, Junior." Benson did as he was told, though of course not without letting a remark follow. "Just remember that you owe me one for all the favors I have done for you today."

"Right... as long it isn't dancing the Remigold..." Alistair muttered, more to himself than the other man. Stepping toward the cot where the Dalish lay, he bent to pick her up. Securing her in his arms, he tried to concentrate on the way ahead instead of the warmth of her underneath his bare hands.

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Nervously pacing up and down for what felt hours, Lenya finally saw the door of Marethari's Aravel opening, and her keeper and the Warden shemlen stepped outside. Finally. After too long, their talk in private had ended. She rushed to their side, anxious to know what they were going to say.

"Your Keeper and I have spoken, and we've come to an arrangement that concerns you," the Warden shem – Duncan – announced with a stern nod. "My order is in need of help. You are in need of a cure. When I leave here, I hope you will join me. You would make an excellent Grey Warden."

"What?" Dread washed over her like an icy downpour, numbing her limbs as her throat tightened. Tamlen... he... and now she would be sent away too? No. She would not accept this. She gritted her teeth as she glared up at this shemlen who dared such audacity. "No!" Lenya snapped, and the gloved hands at her sides balled into fists. "I refuse to be sent away with this shem! My place is with the clan!"
"I cannot express my sadness at sending one of our daughters off into such danger, away from the clan that loves her." Tears began to form in Marethari's eyes, and she tried to embrace Lenya, but she ducked away. She couldn't stand the contact.

"Do not coddle me as if I am three years old." Glowering, Lenya blinked angry tears away. "This is serious!"

"Yes, da'len, it is." The Keeper nodded calmly at her outburst, which only made her angrier. "Since your life is in danger if you stay, but so are all our lives. A great army of darkspawn gathers in the south, and a new Blight threatens the land. We cannot outrun this storm," she told her in the same infuriating calm tone, "if being a Grey Warden is what the Creators intend for you, da'len, meet your destiny with your head held high. No matter where you go, you are Dalish. Never forget that."

"No, I would rather die than to leave!" Lenya was faintly aware of clinging to her keeper's arm and the plaintive tone in her voice that sounded far too much like whining. But the panic about losing the one and only home she'd ever known rising inside her made her forget all of her usual pride. "My clan is all I know! Keeper, don't send me away, I beg you!" She couldn't lose them, too. Not after all that had happened.

Marethari looked at her with tears in her eyes and seemed to hesitate in her insistence. But only a moment later, her expression hardened again as she turned to the shem, nodding. "Do what you must, Duncan."

The shem let out a sorrowful sigh, which was nearly lost to the pounding of her heart in her ears. "I hereby invoke the Right of Conscription."

"And I, as the Keeper of this clan, acknowledge this Right."

"Nooo! Ar din'him sa dorf'len! Ar din'isala ven shem'alus!" Her knees buckled under her weight, and she crashed to the leafed, muddied forest ground. No longer caring to uphold any kind of pretense, Lenya let her head fall into her hands and sobbed.

Crying out, Lenya lurched awake, jostled and disoriented. The first thing she noticed was a warm, mellow hand touching her forehead. "Shht, it is alright, child," a soft voice said next to her, a hand brushing through her hair.

"A-ashalle?" she croaked, her voice rough. Blinking her surroundings into sight, Lenya found herself staring at the dark and thin canvas ceiling of a tent. Memories of what happened and where she was came into her focus next, as much as she wished they wouldn't. Her desperate attempts to escape this Warden shem and run back to her clan had led her here after all. Ostagar. Fighting a shemlen war.

Finding herself lying on some kind of bedding, she sat up and threw the blanket away from herself. The motion of it was too quick, making her head spin. Groaning, she touched her forehead to the ground and gave herself some semblance of stability. It didn't help much, other than making her aware of the wetness around her eyes.

"Easy there, young lady." There was this voice again, reminding her that she wasn't alone.

Hastily, Lenya wiped at the tears and glared at to the person sitting next to her. No, this person wasn't Ashalle. Of course not. She was gone, like the rest of her clan. They left her behind to flee what the Keeper called the Blight and sent her on her way with this damn shem promising a cure
for her sickness. Her stomach lurched at the thought, twisting into too many knots. She was caught here now, with no way to escape. Feeling new tears pricking hotly at the corner of her eyes, Lenya glanced away from the strange elderly woman watching her in silence. As she buried her face in her hands, she felt the woman's hand brushing over her tousled, long hair again.

Lenya flinched away from her touch. "I don't need your pity, shem!"

"Good," she replied, a smile in her voice. "For I have none to give."

That made her look up to her again, the reply most unexpected. She noticed that the gray-haired shem woman was dressed in a red, form-fitting robe. A mage, perhaps? It would explain the thrum of magic, of the Beyond's pull she faintly felt. Lenya's gaze hardened upon her. "What are you doing here in my tent?"

"Well, but you are in my tent, my dear." Turning to stand up, the mage left the tent, and returned with a cup in her hands just moments later. "Here, drink this. You must be parched, and this will help you to get on your feet again." Lenya eyed the proffered cup with distrust and did not take it from her.

"Maker, child. I didn't heal you only to poison you again with a brew." The shem clucked her tongue. "Do you really think I would stoop so low?"

"Yes. I do not know you, in fact." _Shems are not to be trusted_, her mind added, almost immediately.

"Well, my name is Wynne, and I looked after you for the past hours. I am glad to see you waking up and in good spirits again, given your... condition." She frowned, which wrinkled her pale forehead even further. "You were very sick and burning up when your fellow Warden brought you here. I was able to lower your temperature with my magic, but it won't last for long."

"My... what?" Lenya faintly remembered the odd, talkative shemlen she had set out to find here in Ostagar – if only to finally get away from the man who took her from her clan against her will. The mage flicked her hand, and Lenya felt the tinge of magic prickling on her skin as the content in the cup started to steam. "Here, drink. You need it."

"Fine," she gave in with a sigh and took it. As she held it close in her hands without drinking, the bittersweet scent of elfroot wafted into her nose. "Ugh."

"It is a medicinal herb tea I brewed after you got here," Wynne explained, unbidden. "I have only warmed it up for you again, since it is more digestible for your nervous stomach this way."

"I know," Lenya mumbled in reply, blowing on the hot liquid to cool it down. _Ashalle used to make it for me when I was_ – she stopped the thought, forced herself to. With a heavy heart, she slowly drank, taking small sips. She both hated and yearned for the familiarity of this beverage; caught between wanting to savor it and flinging the cup and its contents against the canvas wall. For a moment, the warmth of it gave her a sense of calm, however fleeting it was.

"I spoke with Duncan, your commander-

"This shem is not my anything!" Lenya harshly cut into her words, putting the now emptied wooden cup down.

"I see," the human hummed, seemed to deliberate on her next words. She sat down next to the Dalish on the ground and folded her hands in her lap. "I heard you aren't here out of your free will, and that your sickness is the reason. Even then, you tried to escape him and run back to your clan.
several times." The thin lines of her mouth curved upwards and amusement weaved into her words. "Impressive how you made the Warden Commander work to bring you here." She only stared at the mage, unable to discern what she wanted to achieve with her words. "However, the extra strain put on your ill body wasn't beneficial for your health and also a factor in you passing out not long ago. You remember that, don't you?"

Ah. "Why do you even care, shem?"

"Because I was the one healing you, young lady." She let out a sigh. "I understand you are a long way from home, from your people but even so, you have to take better care of yourself. If not for me or the Wardens, do it for the people you care about."

"They are all gone now..." Lenya said under her breath, her voice barely more than a whisper. Swallowing thickly, she blinked the tears away and felt her anger rising. No, she wouldn't cry anymore, not in front of them, ever. She was Dalish and proud to be. If not that, what was left for her? Never again shall we submit. She couldn't show them even an inkling of weakness. "Stop meddling and prodding, human. It is none of your business."

"Maybe I am meddling," the mage shemlen admitted with a nonchalant shrug and chuckled. "Isn't that what old people such as myself do?"

Lenya only made an annoyed sound in the back of her throat. What was the deal with this human?

"To be honest," she continued, "I'd rather be in the tower now than participating in the war, but sometimes we don't have a choice and do what we must do. Maybe joining the Wardens is a new chance for you, even if it is an unwanted one." She tilted her head and looked at her intently. "And this will certainly be the one that saves your life. So it is worth a try at least, is it not?"

Ah yes, the supposed cure for her sickness that warden shem promised and dragged her here for to Ostagar against her will. For a good amount of the distance traveled he did so in quite the literal sense, even. Especially after her various escape attempts, after which he had her bound and thrown over his horse like luggage. Her expression shifted to a scowl. "It wasn't my choice, I want nothing of it."

"And yet you are here," the mage simply stated. "What does this make you then?"

The question threw her for a loop. Instead of replying, Lenya rushed to her feet, her patience spent. "Can I go now?" Why was she even asking for permission? "I'm going now," she quickly corrected herself.

Wynne bestowed her with a knowing look, frustratingly so. "Oh, certainly, my dear."

"Ugh." Before she had a chance to storm out, Lenya noticed the lack of her weapon belt around her hips and whirled around, furious. "Where are my belongings? My weapons? You took them away!"

"I did nothing of this sort, young lady. Your fellow Warden took them for safekeeping, as he went back to the Warden encampment. You will most likely find him and your belongings there, in the southern part of Ostagar."

That thieving shem'alas, how dare he touch them, take them away from her? Lenya balled her hands to fists at her side. Not answering, she rushed out of the tent and headed, with quick, angry steps, toward the encampment of the Wardens.
Sitting in front of his own tent, Alistair eyed the two slightly curved blades sheathed in the belt lying on his lap. The dark brown leather sheaths of the blades were sturdy and ornamented with fine, intertwined lines of leaves and vines. Fitting for the weapons of a Dalish, he supposed. What really really caught his eye was a smaller dagger in a plain leather sheath, however. Taking it out of the sheath to still his curiosity, he noted a similar curved blade and the intricate, foreign carvings on its hilt. The dagger itself was old and worn, the blade blunt and scratched. To him, it made no sense that someone would want to carry it around in this state, since it couldn't be used for anything.

"Oy, went under the rogues after all, did ya?"

The sudden voice made his head snap back up, bringing Daveth into the focus of his vision. Feeling caught, Alistair hid the blade within his lap. "I can assure you, the only way I will ever be a roguish sneaky type and do what you guys do will be running headlong into every trap possible. And thus disarming them for everybody else."

"Hmm, sounds painful."He laughed."So ya better not, mate."

"I don't plan to, believe me. I like using my shield to bash darkspawn in the head. Or hiding behind it."

"So whadda ya doing with these weapons then?" Daveth nodded toward the weapon belt in his lap. Damn this man and his curiosity. "Have you stolen it somewhere? And, if so, can I have these?"

"S-stolen?" Alistair sputtered. He couldn't believe it. "N-no, of course not. I'm only keeping them safe until -"

"You!" The sudden, very livid arrival of a particular elven woman stopped Alistair in his tracks. Heedless of all the other Wardens around her, she stormed directly toward him, her whole 5'2" of height shaking with rage. With someone else her size and trim, lean stature, it would have looked comical, but with her it was downright terrifying, making him wince. Especially as her gaze fell on the belt he still held onto. "Shem'alas, you stole my weapons!" A few foreign curses in her native language followed her glare before she snatched her belt from him and whirled around. Noticing almost instantly how something was amiss with it, or rather missing still, she turned around again. Oh crap. Everyone around him had fallen deadly silent and were staring at the scene unfolding before their eyes. His heart racing, Alistair wished he could dissolve into thin air or at least fling the dagger in another direction and blame it on wild animals. "How dare you touching my belongings?" Gloved hands balled into fists, she looked all too ready to use them on his face. He liked his face the way it was, so he quickly and meekly returned the blade to her.

"I-uh, just kept it safe until your return, really."

But the Dalish wasn't interested in hearing an explanation or staying. Having reclaimed what was rightfully hers, she rushed into the other direction without looking back. So much for making a good first impression. Or a second, in his case.

"Oh suuure you haaaave," Daveth drawled in her stead, sounding far too amused for his taste. Alistair also noticed his appraising stare on her rapidly retreating backside – which would have annoyed him, if he weren't too busy shrinking into himself. "She is a wild one, innit? I like that."
"Pfft, you like everything on two legs with tits," Junan cut in, snorting. "Besides, this woman would cut your dick off quicker than you can say ‘Dalish’, I'm sure." He turned to Alistair with a shit-eating grin. "So that is the recruit who managed to exhaust the Commander so much that he needed to rest for a few hours after his arrival? I can see now why. Also heard she tried to escape a couple of times and run back to her clan. Duncan had to chase after her each time and rein her in to bring her here."

"She did what?" His face still flushed, Alistair's eyes went wide. "Even with the Blight sickness eating her alive?"

"Aye." His fellow Warden nodded, still grinning. "The darkspawn won't know what hit them."

Having met her two times so far and on both occasions furious and glaring, Alistair was more than inclined to agree.

While he still digested the information given to him, Duncan emerged from his tent in the center of their encampment. His mentor walked across the camp to reach them, halting in front of Junan and the Warden recruit. "Ah good, Daveth, you are here. Find Jory and then meet me, armed and armored, at the large bonfire in the center."

"Aye, boss, will do." Daveth mock-saluted, though he turned to leave right after.

As he greeted Alistair with an acknowledging nod, he noticed just how exhausted Duncan looked, despite his rest. His deep russet complexion had taken on a dull ashen tone, and his eyes were somewhat bleary and reddened. "Alistair, where is the new recruit who arrived with me?"

"Um, well, she was here, but you just missed her, actually." He cleared his throat as he stood up. "She left only moments ago." Better not to mention this whole gaffe with her weapons, since he seemed troubled enough already.

"Left?" A panicked edge mixed into his mentor's voice, which he wouldn't have understood were it not for Junan's tendency to always gossip like a fishwife.

"The camp, I mean. Not Ostagar," he hurried to add. "... I hope."

Duncan pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes with his bare hand. "Maker's breath."

"That bad, huh?" Alistair suppressed the grin that wanted to tug at his lips. For Duncan's sake. Junan next to him was far less subtle, however. "Heard you had some hard days with her, Commander."

Duncan sighed, letting it fade into a quiet groan. "To put it mildly. Her determination to put distance between herself and myself has been... challenging, but we are here at last." His eyes slid sideways to Junan: a quiet warning to not push the issue further. "And that is all that counts."

"Of course," was the noncommittal agreement, "as long you are sure that Dalish is indeed worth the all trouble, especially so close to the battle."

"I would not have conscripted her if I did not think she had promise."

"Conscripted?" A bark of laughter escaped Alistair. "You had to conscript her? Maker, she really doesn't want to be here, huh?" Given how sick she was, her unwillingness was even more odd.

"She will have time to adapt to her new life, after the battle," Duncan said in the tone that didn't leave room for discussion. "For now, it is important we concentrate on the preparations for the
Joining."

"I thought Galen already did that?" Junan asked, frowning.

"Yes, thankfully. But, as always, the recruits have to do their parts too, of course." He turned sideways to Alistair. "I need you to find her and then meet me at our day post by the bonfire. It is time for you to lead your charges through the Wilds."

"Find her?" Alistair nearly sputtered, shaking his head. "Duncan, she isn't exactly what you would call cooperative."

"Oh, I am sure you will find a way, Junior." Junan nudged him with his elbow, which made Alistair roll his eyes at his fellow Warden, but didn't stop him from doubling down. "Use your charm to rein in the lady."

"If you want her to abandon Ostagar and run back to her clan after all, I just might," he shot back, his tone biting.

"Are you done bickering now?" Duncan simply asked, his gaze stern. "Or are there any more mages you need to sass, Alistair?"

"Junan isn't a ma...-- oh that." With all that had happened, the unwilling weasel-like mage had already slipped his mind. He shrugged. "What can I say? The revered mother ambushed me here in camp. The way she wields guilt they should stick her in the army."

Duncan shook his head. "We cannot afford to antagonize anyone, Alistair. We don't need to give anyone more ammunition against us."

Alistair felt his gut knot up. Duncan also utilized guilt as a weapon now, which wasn't wholly fair. Even if there was truth in his words. The picture of Teyrn Loghain and his sharp, judging words about the Wardens came back before his eyes, unbidden. "You're right, Duncan. I apologize," he gave in. Letting out a frustrated hiss, Alistair dragged a bare hand through his hair. "Alright, alright, I'm going. Just give me a moment to get ready and -" he trailed off in favor of reclaiming his missing armor pieces and weapons from his tent, glad to feel their familiar weight in his hands. At least he would now be armed when meeting her, so he could hide behind his shield when she would inevitably resort to glaring at him again. "But if I don't come back -"

"Maker, you treat her as if she is an ogre, when she is just a homesick, young gal, Junior."

Normally, the older Warden had the patience of a saint, especially with his brand of humor. So this made his sudden outburst even more unexpected. "I know we were all jesting about her furious appearance here, but maybe, simply try treating her like a person instead?"

"I-" Shoulders slumping, Alistair glanced away. His chest tightened as guilt settled in once more. Perhaps he had been carried away by it all, by the amusing anecdotes of her gruff behavior and escape attempts. She seemed to him more like a mystical creature than a person who was sick with the Blight and cut off from the life and all the people she'd ever known. Not everyone chose to be a Warden like he had, and Junan's words were an unwanted but important reminder of that. Maker, come to think of it, he didn't even know her name, least of all anything else. Alistair didn't expect her to share anything with him, considering how their two meetings had gone down so far. Yet it wouldn't hurt to at least ask her. Her being a Warden recruit made her his responsibility as well, and he had to take care that they, and she in particular, were prepared before meeting darkspawn in the Wilds. Not that he looked forward to this part himself, but as a full-fledged Warden his lead was needed.
"You are right. I really should try this," he said eventually, determined to see it through. Duncan was counting on him, after all. And he, sort of, owed it to the Dalish to give her a chance. At least finding her in the giant ruins had been made easier due to being able to sense the taint in her. Not thinking longer about what that meant, Alistair set out for his task.

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The tumbled walls of the ancient ruins stretched upward to loom overhead like the ribs of some massive beast. Overgrown patches of tall grass hugged the stones' ends here and there, while small plants shot up in the cracks between the cobblestone path. They swayed gently in the late-summer breeze and basked in the sun's glow. Despite its peaceful picture, it felt devoid by life to her, as covered in stone as everything here was. Neither the wilderness slowly consuming the aged architecture, nor the moss gripping every wall could shift this impression. To her, it was more an imitation of nature, a last defiant flare of it, not like home. *Never* like home.

Lenya dragged her hand along the walls as she walked, with far less urgency than before. The stone was hot to her touch; the heat even permeated the thick leather of her gloves. Her fingers splayed along each crack within, its white surface made smooth by centuries of rain and wind. It was as much a mindless, idle activity to her as getting to know the perimeters of this dreaded place that felt so much like a prison. A very wide, overcrowded, stinking and loud prison at that. Creators, not a single moment passed without someone yelling or crying. It Felt like a place where bleating cattle were kept until they were led to the slaughter.

Considering how close the impending battle appeared to be, it seemed to be a fitting notion somehow. Meeting their foolish keep—*king* earlier hadn't exactly filled her with hope regarding their overall chance of survival. Alas, this also included her, as caught as she was in this place now.

Behind her, something loud and metallic clattered upon stone. She snapped a suspicious glance over her shoulder toward the source and saw how a flat-eared servant grovelled to his feet to gather the batch of weapons he'd dropped.

*Pathetic.*

Her face twisted into a scowl, and she accelerated her steps to get away from this undignified imitation of an elf. Was this her life now? Being around only shemlen and flat ears who served them without question? If so, dying of this strange sickness seemed the far better, quicker and less painful option. Then again, their idiotic keep—*king*, who thought of strategy as boring, might do the same trick. *If* she even lived long enough to see them fail spectacularly, of course.

Sighing at the thought, Lenya looked upward to determine the current time. With her hand, she shielded her eyes to hinder the glare of the sun from blinding her. It still stood high, framed within a clear blue sky, indicating it was early midday at best. Having long since fulfilled the urge to get away from the annoying, thieving shem, she wasn't quite sure what to do with herself now.

Stopping again, she breathed in deeply, only to immediately wrinkle her nose at the stench coming from the place with animals constantly… *barking*? Underneath the tang of hay and musk, it smelled similar to freshly skinned bear fur that hadn't aired out enough yet.

She coughed to keep the sudden bout of nausea at bay, but, being too curious, she still found herself walking in the direction of the animals. Lenya had heard stories of fearsome war-beasts from Ashalle and the older hunters that traded in shemlen cities, but had never seen a hound up close.
Such animals were revered by the shemlen only, and they rarely ventured so deep into the Brecilian Forest as to meet one of the clans. Except for these damn three shemlen with whom everything beg-

"Are you the new Grey Warden?"

Being so caught up in thoughts and regrets, Lenya hadn't even noticed that the way she treads had come to an end and left her standing here, in front of the animals' kennel. Only a flimsy wooden fence separated her from the massive war hounds, but she didn't feel threatened. Most of them simply sat in their pen and peered at her with mild disinterest, if they reacted at all to her presence.

"I could use some help," the voice tried anew, reminding her of being addressed earlier.

Her head snapped up to find yet another, older human looking at her expectantly. He was clad in rough leather armor, his skin a golden brown. His dark, shoulder-long strands and beard were peppered with gray. He kind of reminded her of that damn Warden shem, but then again humans looked all the same to her. She crossed her arms and glared up at him. "Why should I help you?"

"This is a mabari. Smart breed, and strong." He gestured to the pen beside him. "His owner died in the last battle, and the poor hound swallowed darkspawn blood. I have medicine that might help, but I need him muzzled first."

Lenya's defiant stance softened. "He's... sick?" Like me.

The shem nodded, the lines of his face furrowing further as he frowned. "I will have to put him down if he doesn't get his treatment. To help him, I need to muzzle him first, but I fear being bitten and contracting the darkspawn taint. You, however..." He pointed at her. "... are a Grey Warden, or soon will be. All Wardens are immune to the darkspawn taint. The most you have to worry about is some tooth marks."

Without answering, Lenya stepped closer to the pen and stretched to peer over the high wooden fence. Behind it, the hound sat huddled against the stone wall in the furthest corner. Ears flattened, the animal trembled and saliva trailed in strings and foamy gobs from his mouth. Sensing her gaze, he heaved his muscular head to look at her with a quiet whine, before falling back into his routine of sickness-induced apathy.

Her throat tightened and she had to blink fast to keep the tears at bay. Seeing the animal struck with the same sickness burning inside of her was too close for comfort. "I'll do it," she announced quickly. "I want to help him."

"Thank the Maker!" The human let out a sigh of relief and approached her to hand her a weird dark leather construct. "I would be loathe to lose such a fine mabari."

Lenya eyed the foreign... thing before taking it. "How...?"

"This is the muzzle, of course. Put it over his head and jaw," the shemlen explained. "But before you do that, let him smell you. Show him you are no threat."

She didn't reply, already too focused on taking measured steps forward, as he opened the gate to the pen. Her breath quickened as she advanced on the animal and briefly caught in her throat when she saw its massive size up close. The beast was easily three feet high at the shoulder and covered in coarse, tawny fur with black dots. Growling quietly, he pressed his heavily-muscled body further into the wall behind him. Curling his lips back in warning, he revealed teeth that looked as sharp and large as those of grown forest bears.
Instinctively, Lenya halted all her movements. Backed away in the corner as the animal already was, every further step would have been one too much and cause it to attack. So instead of coming too close, she started to slowly and very deliberately kneel down to be on level with the mabari. It was a dangerous gamble, for one wrong or too hasty movement could signal the hound to jump and kill her with his massive jaw and fangs. Letting the heavy leather muzzle fall down beside her into the hay, she looked at him and found remarkable intelligence in those honey-colored eyes.

"Harel'din, da'fen. I'm not here to hurt you," Lenya said, keeping her voice soft and low.

Relinquishing his aggressive stance almost immediately after she had spoken these words, the hound cocked his head and observed her with open interest. "You can feel it burning too, right? The sickness, the corruption. It churns within your veins and beneath your skin like a festering wound." He gave her a small woof, as if agreeing, and she had an inking that he understood every of her words. "I'm sick too, you know?" His short, pointy ears now upright, he whined and pawed at the soft, hay-covered soil. He looked as if he wanted to come closer to her, but seemed unsure of it.

Lenya breathed in, small choppy intakes of air that tasted too much like sadness upon her tongue. It was too late to back down now anyway, even if a not insignificant part of her felt incredibly stupid for baring her soul to a dog. Then again, she had spoken to her clan's halla before and this creature seemed to possess similar intelligence and awareness of its surroundings. "My Keeper's magic kept the sickness at bay for weeks, but I can feel its effect dwindling and the corruption starting to eat at me again. It hurts and -" Trailing off to swallow thickly, Lenya's voice dropped to a hushed whisper. "Maybe it would have been better if I hadn't survived this and died like -" The hound let out a long, loud whine and nudged her with his head. The sudden force of it nearly threw her off-balance, and she needed a moment to stabilize herself – in more ways than one. Huffing softly, he lay his large head upon her shoulder, practically forcing her to embrace his thick, muscular neck. As she did so, she regretted that she was still wearing her gloves. Her fingers itched to feel the coarse, short fur her hands were curled into. The hound still smelt too much like wet forest bear and wolf combined for her taste, though the quiet solace, this sudden understanding between them, was too invaluable to her to really care about it now.

"You have lost someone too, haven't you?" He nudged her shoulder and whined plaintively next her ear. Then, the mabari begun to pant more and more all of a sudden. The tremor rocking through his canine body vibrated underneath her fingertips, reminding her why she had come here in the first place. Like her, the animal was in pain. "Let me help you, da'fen. Hold still." Backing away, she reached for the muzzle beside her. Lenya noticed how he fought against the trembles and held still for her, even though she needed several attempts to fit the muzzle over his head in the right way. "There, done." She patted his head. "Good boy. You'll see, it will be alright. Everything will be alright," she repeated, not believing her own words. How could she, so far away from everyone she'd ever cared for?

Behind her, someone cleared his throat and fell into a fit of coughing in doing so. "I... um, wow, here you are," the person then managed, and she recognized his voice. It was this damn thieving shem again. How long had he been standing there? Her ears twitched slightly as the heat rose to their tips. Once. Twice. She was going to kill him. Swallowing through a too tight throat, the incalculable of embarrassment settled in the pit of her stomach as a blazing fire, burning in tune with the corruption inside. As she jumped to her feet and whirling round to him, her shoulders stiffened. "You! Again!"

"That was remarkable, Warden," the hound master interrupted her with a smile, completely oblivious to her rage. "I have rarely seen something like this, if at all. I thought he was a lost case, but now I can treat the dog properly – poor fellow."
Lenya only spared him a single sharp look before approaching the Warden again. He hands on her hips, she peered up at his impossible height. *Why are all the shemlen so tall, ugh.*

"Why are you following me around, shem?"

He made several unintelligible sounds, his mouth popping open and shut, letting them end in a whimper. Pink slowly turned to crimson and settled within the cheeks of his brown skin. Hazel-colored eyes darted about in panic as he struggled for anything resembling words. Her own eyes narrowed on him with a scoff.

Creators, even the dog just now had better communication skills.

"I, um, was searching for you, in fact," he said, just when she'd given up on ever hearing a coherent word out of his mouth. "And I found you, wow." His held breath came out as a weak, nervous laugh.

"Yes, you have," she stated, coolly, and stepped out of the dog pen. "Now go away."

"I would leave you talking to... hounds all day, if I could..." Her look shifted to a full blown glare at that, causing him to add in a rush, "... but as the Junior member of the order, and you being a Warden recruit, it is my task to take care of you and -"

"Like stealing my weapons?"

His eyes pinched briefly shut. When he reopened them, his expression on her hardened. "I did not steal them, nor did I intend on eavesdropping on your quality time with the dog." Huffing a resigned sigh, he looked upwards and grimaced. "Look," the shem said, his gaze open, beseeching her. "I'm aware we started off on the wrong foot. Or... several, in fact. But since we are going to spend the next hours together, can we please start over? My name is Alistair and -"

Lenya's eyebrows shot up to her hairline, before furrowing into a frown. "The next few hours? Why?"

"Hmm, caught that part at least, huh?" His lips twitched with wry amusement. Which was a surprising change after all of his stammering and overall idiocy. "I see you already have your weapons that you are so fond of. Good. Since you and I, err, and the two other recruits are going to head to the Wilds very soon."

Everything in her bristled at the mere thought of spending any more minutes with that human, least of all hours. "No."

"Aww, don't be like that, dear lady." Pursing his lips into a mock pout, he clasped his gauntleted hands over his heart. "You wound my pride."

"I will wound much more if you don't leave me alone," Lenya warned and began to head in the opposite direction of this living and breathing nuisance. Though the kennel master's voice quickly halted her steps.

"Excuse me, Wardens. I couldn't help to overhear your conversation. You are heading into the Korcari Wilds soon?"

"Yes."

"No." She continued to walk away.
"There's a particular herb I could use to improve the dog's chances to survive." At that, Lenya froze on the spot, turning around to face the older man from some distance. The shemlen took it as sign to go on with his request. "It's a flower that grows in the Wilds here, often on top of rotting wood. If you happen across it, I could use the plant to treat the dog. It looks very distinctive: all white with a blood-red center."

Lenya squinted at him, then at the dog's pen, and back at the man. She pointedly ignored the Warden shem standing in the middle. "Why don't you do it yourself?"

"I would, but the Wilds are off-limits to non-soldiers," he explained, heaving his shoulders in a shrug. "And I have many other hounds under my care."

"Will the mabari be alright without the flower?"

"For a time, perhaps," the man said, shaking his head. "But eventually I would have to put him down."

Ugh. Lenya gritted her teeth together. She hated this lack of choices, which seemed to cling to her like halla droppings did to boots. Agreeing to this task meant agreeing to follow the other, very annoying shemlen, but if she didn’t do this, the hound would most certainly die. And of all the people in this creators-damned place, she liked the dog most... by far. "Fine," she pressed out. "I'll go there, for the flower."

"Aaaand collecting darkspawn blood." Lenya grimaced at his reappearance, which he mistook as disgust about the topic. "Sorry, it is part of your task for the Joining, but don't worry, I will be with you, err, all of you, all the way." Smiling a lopsided grin, the shem headed toward the center of the main area.

"Great," she groused, and followed him at some distance.

"Yes, isn't it?" he agreed, his voice laced with a sarcastic cheer. "Like a party, indeed. We can all stand in a circle and hold hands. That would give the darkspawn there pause, I'm sure." Slowing down his walk, he waited for her to catch up to him, thwarting her plan of keeping her distance. He turned to her as soon she arrived in line with him. "Come to think of it, I still don't know your name."

"Because I have not given it to you, shem."

"Right. So, um, what do I call you, then?"

"Not interested."

"Hello 'not interested', I'm Alistair. *Oh no, he did not just*-- Lenya's step faltered from the effort it took to not throw herself down and curl into a ball of cringe. Oblivious to her inner pain, he flashed her a grin and seemed quite proud of himself. "Huh, that is a strange name for a woman. Is it Dalish, perhaps?"

Ugh, she thought. "Ugh," she also said, accentuating the word with another grimace, and accelerating her steps as Duncan came into view in front of a large bonfire. For all the many times she tried to get away from this damn human, she could currently not be any more glad to see him again.

Chapter End Notes
Change notes:

I scrapped the entire old chapter and version, since I now really dislike the tone, pacing and characterization in it. Lenya's characterization is also different, though in its essence still stays true to her overall character. I just wanted to dig deeper than the cringy "har har look a crazy elf who glares a lot" my old version had going on for some reason. And this is the (hopefully better) result of it. I did cut a lot of the unimportant side-quest stuff I have described in great detail in the old version. Helping the dog is the only one that is plot-relevant, after all.

Also new is the emphasis on her blight sickness, which I had forgone before, but found important to bring in greater detail. After all, Mahariel is the only origin where you are already tainted and need the Joining to live.

Kudos and especially comments are much appreciated.
On the search for darkspawn blood and the Grey Warden relict in the Wilds, Lenya finds herself wanting to know more about a certain person they meet, and discovers that some legends *are* true.

Thanks to heffalumps for the beta read :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Help!"

Hearing a strangled cry cutting through the thick air of the Wilds, Alistair broke into a sprint. With his weapon and shield still in hand, he cut around the faraway corner, past the wolf carcasses they had killed only moments earlier. The three recruits followed him at some distance. Or so he hoped.

Arriving long before they did, he found himself standing at the site of a bloody massacre. A massive wagon lay overturned by the side of the swamp, and the equally large oxen that had been pulling it lay dead next to it in a large pool of blood. Huge strips of meat and even some limbs had been torn off the animal, clearly the handiwork of darkspawn, ugh, feasting upon its carcass. The animal hadn't been the only victim of the attack, of course. Several heavily-armored men lay face-down and bloodied on the spongy, unnaturally green ground turned crimson. Alistair heard the heavy steps of Jory and Daveth approaching behind him, yet otherwise the Wilds were deathly quiet. Had he just imagined hearing -

"Over here!" There it was again. As he darted forward, he saw a wounded man sprawled on the ground, trying to crawl toward him. The man squinted up at him, his words rushed, panicked. "My scouting band was attacked by darkspawn! They came out of the ground. Please, help me! I've got to... return to camp!"

Alistair quickly set aside his weapon and shield to rummage in his small supply bag for the scarce bandages within. Finding them, he peered down at the man and raised an eyebrow. "Well, he's not half as dead as he looks, is he?"

"Who is that?" the wounded soldier cried out, pained. "Grey Wardens?"

"Ugh," the Dalish made what seemed to be her umpteenth noise of disgust, making him jump. He hadn't even noticed that she'd appeared next to him. However useful it had proven to be only moments ago, it was still a little unsettling to him how quietly she was able to move. Looking back up, she let her eyes stray to the distanced part of the swamp, and all of a sudden the scowl seemingly permanently etched across her features vanished. "Oh," she exclaimed, stepping over the wounded, gore-covered soldier as if he were merely part of the scenery, "I think I have found it."
Before he could bristle at her callousness, Daveth spoke up. "Ya finished staring, or do ya wanna wait till the fellow here bleeds out?" The man on the ground moaned, too weak to ask for help again.

Right.

Kneeling down to him, Alistair started to cautiously probe for the man’s worst wounds. He quickly found them in his midsection, where a part of his armor was missing. "Jory, help me to press down here," he said, though the man remained frozen on the spot, as if in fear.

"Andraste's bare tits," Daveth swore, rolling his eyes as he pushed past him and took Jory's place to aid Alistair. "Are ya useful for anything, Ser Knight?"

"Did you hear? An entire patrol of seasoned men killed by darkspawn!" Ser Jory's breath came out a tremble. "How many darkspawn can the four of us slay? A dozen? A hundred? There's an entire army in these forests!"

Alistair bit back the annoyed groan bubbling up his throat. He did not have time for this, especially not right now. Even as he focused on fastening and securing the bandage as tight as possible around the soldier's midsection, he looked up at the frightened man for a moment. "Yes, there are darkspawn about, but we're in no danger of walking into the bulk of the horde. As a Warden, I can sense them."

"See, Ser Knight," Daveth said, looking up with a smirk on his face. "We might die horribly, but at least we will be warned about it."

Just as Alistair had finished treating the wounds and helped the man back up on his feet, the elven woman reappeared next to him. For a moment, the soldier wobbled, unsteady, but then pushed past them, eager to get away. "Thank you! I... I've got to get out of here!"

The Dalish watched him hobble away toward camp with barely disguised contempt. "He will never make it back alone. It would have been better to put him out of his misery."

"Oh yes, of course. That is not callous at all," Alistair snapped back, glaring at her. "Maker, remind me to never get wounded around you!" He scoffed. "But wow, so nice of you to join us again."

She mirrored his glare with her own, before extinguishing its ferocity with a roll of her eyes. "Whatever, shem. I have what I want, so I am going now."

His gaze flicked down to her hands, recognizing she held the same flower the kennel master had described to them not long ago. "Eager to return to your only friend, I see." At that, her steps hitched and eventually stopped. It was a low blow, not his finest moment by far. Yet something about her, this sheer indifference she showed for everyone around her, let him all too willingly rise to the bait she had laid out so readily. She made it obvious every waking moment that she didn't want to be here, and that made him livid too. The Wardens - Duncan - tried to save her life and still she'd shown them - him - nothing but contempt.

"Eh lass, not that I'd mind leaving this bloody place with ya," Daveth chipped in, "but ya still need to collect yo share of darkspawn blood and find the cache with us before ya do that!" Her answer came swiftly in the form of a raised middle finger over her shoulder.

"Oh, ruuude." The thief laughed. Unlike Jory, who stared at her with a shocked expression in his eyes, he seemed amused by her reaction. "In which part of the forest did they teach ya that?"

Alistair didn't share his enthusiasm - far from it, in fact. With a single stride, he closed the distance
she had already put between herself and them and grabbed her by the arm to force her to look at him. Underneath the hard pace of the heartbeat thrumming in his ears, he was aware he was yelling. "What is your sodding problem, woman?"

She locked eyes with him for a moment, motionless. Then, she yanked her arm away. "Don't touch me!" Her shoulders pushed back in a stiff line, before they began trembling. So did her voice, contrasting the sharpness of her tone. "My problem?" She gritted her teeth. "You. Them. This here. All of it. No one asked for you shemlen to intervene. And still did one of yours strode into our camp like a human emerald knight, after -" Her voice faltered, and she swallowed audibly.

"Oh excuse Duncan for saving you."

"I did not ask him to!" The words burst out of her. "Nor did I want him to take me away from my clan."

Scowling, Alistair shook his head. "Maker, woman, don't you want to live? Joining the Wardens is your only way to survive your illness."

"And? What life is that?" She stepped closer still, imposing on his personal space so much that he could feel the heat radiating from her body. As he inhaled harshly to steady himself, the scent of leather and blood wafted into his flared nostrils. The taint inside of her screamed and scratched in his head - volatile, akin to darkspawn. He backed away, needed to. "I would have rather died among my clan, my family, but I didn't even get that. Instead, I'm now stuck, caught and imprisoned here, like the hound in his pen. The only difference is that my pen is a bit larger. So yeah." She smiled bitterly. "Don't expect me to grovel at your feet like the flat-ears do."

"I'm not, at all." Alistair had no idea whom she actually meant with 'flat-ears', but it was the most candid she'd ever been with him. He could use it, hopefully. "Just... returning to camp will achieve nothing. We can't return without these items. If we do, it will only postpone the Joining, and you should know why that would be a bad idea for you."

Her shoulders fell back down as some of her tension dissipated, though her eyes never lost their intensity. "Everyone keeps going on about this Joining. What makes it so fucking special?"

"Look," he said with a sigh, dropping his voice further. "I can't tell you much. Only that it will make you, err, immune against the sickness inside of you. So that is a good thing, right?"

She scoffed. "That remains to be seen."

"Still angry, then." He huffed a curt laugh and felt the corner of his lip turn upward. "Good. If you use that against the darkspawn we meet, I can assure you we will get done here much faster."

The elf was quiet for a moment, seemingly weighing her options. Looking down, he saw how she twirled the thin stem of the dog flower between her gloved fingers. Her foot tapped repeatedly on the ground, its sound swallowed by the spongy soil. "Fine," she said another moment later, stowing the flower safely away in her belt bag. "I can do that."

"Really?" Truth be told, Alistair hadn't expected her to agree with him - with any of it, to be exact. "Huh, glad to hear it, then. So, since we are getting along so well now, will you reveal the secret of your name?"

"You are pushing your luck, shem."

"No, it is more for strategic reasons." Mostly. "It will be difficult to warn you about darkspawn wanting to stab your back or any other side of you, when all I can do is yell 'hey you, watch out'."
Because then everyone is starting to turn around and -"
"Creators, will you shut up if I tell you my name?"

Alistair chuckled. "Maybe? Unless it is warning you about darkspawn or -"

"Lenya, ugh."

"Lenya, ugh? Is that your surname?" Okay, maybe he was overusing this joke and indeed pushing his luck. He raised his hands in apology to keep her from snapping at him. "I jest, I jest. It is a nice name, really."

"I don't care what you think," she said, roughly pushing past him. Ah, so back to good old hostility, it was. He let out a wry snort as he watched her - Lenya - stalking away, this time in the right direction.

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The last darkspawn of the horde fell dead to the ground with a dull thud, speared in the back by one of her blades. Pulling the dagger out, Lenya averted her face as black, acrid arcs of blood from a torn artery sprayed hotly across her arms. The rank, pungent reek of corruption bit and burned in her nose, reminding her all too much of rotting deer carcasses left behind by wild predators in the woods.

Holding her breath, she squatted down to its corpse to fill her own vial with the remainder of its rancid blood. The two idiot recruits had already succeeded in this task some time ago, and the Warden shem kept annoying her to get her own. So it was better to finally get it over with, her deep disgust and repulsion to touch these rotten bastards notwithstanding.

"Ugh," she grunted, after resurfacing, giving the twisted figure on the ground a hard kick with her boots.

"I see you got your vial at last, Lenya." Wiping his sword on some leaves and sheathing it again, the Warden approached her. "About time, too. Would have been awkward if we had killed all the darkspawn in our way, and you still hadn't gotten your vial."

She felt him looming at her back, but didn't turn around to face him. "If you don't want me to add a vial of your blood to the mix, you better shut up, shem!

"Aww." He chuckled. "Why did I know you would say that? I think it is because we were getting to know each other really well these past few hours." It wasn't his first delve into sarcasm and, sadly, it would not be his last. "I also know that this isn't your first time meeting darkspawn," he added, his tone suddenly far more serious.

"Oh really?" Lenya rolled her eyes and found herself observing the horizon. Behind a thick white vapor, the low-hanging sun looked like a faded orb, robbed of most of its color and brilliance. It would be evening soon. "How you excel at stating the obvious, shem. Since you have been here too these past few hours."

"No, I meant before the Wilds."
She whirled around to stare at him. "What? How do you know?"

"Just common sense, really." He shrugged. The motion lifted the heavy shoulder plates of his armor with a creak. "I see, um, the way you fight them. You go straight for their weak points. Such things aren't common knowledge, unless you have already encountered them or studied them."

Now Lenya was the one shrugging, if only to cover up her surprise about how... observant this shemlen was. "As hideous as these bastards are, they bleed the same as a person or animal would. So killing them isn't exactly complicated."

"Oh, I will remind you of that when we are encountering an ogre. After I have finished soiling my pants, of course." A small smile tugged at his lips. "In any case, it shows why Duncan recruited you."

"Recruited?" Lenya started walking toward the faraway building up the hill, which was half-shrouded in mist. She didn't even bother waiting for him, least of all for the other two idiots who trailed after them like obedient, brain-dead creatures. Threading up the hill toward the crumbling remains of a ruin, she scoffed. "Such a nice word for ripping me away from my life and family."

"Yes, and if it saves your life, wasn't it worth it, then?" he argued from some distance behind her, and she heard how his steps accelerated when he seemed to realize where she headed. "T-this is the tower we're searching for!" She felt like there was relief in his voice, too, if for wholly other reasons. She was sick and tired of this place and its company. There had been nothing but darkspawn, stinking bogs, opaque waddles of mist obscuring her sight, and humid, foul air to breathe for endless hours now. At this point, she would gladly return to the camp she had called her prison before.

"The chest... The treaties..." Suppressing a groan at the human's alert voice, she rushed upwards to see what he had found - only to let it out when she arrived and saw the scene for herself. Underneath the remnants of spiraling stone stairs stood a heavy metallic chest, like the Warden leader shemlen said it would. Though instead of finding it sealed as thought, the lid of it had been burst into many sharp bits, and its contents... missing. Lenya reached up to rub her forehead in annoyance, which only served to smear the blood stuck there further across her face. Ugh.

"Oh, perfect. This whole bloody trek has been for nothing then, eh?" one of the two idiots said behind her. While she had never bothered to learn their names, nor cared much for their existence in general, she found herself agreeing with the rogue’s sentiment.

The whiny knight looked like he was about to cry. Again. "What are we going to do no-"

"Well, well, what have we here?" Lenya jerked around at the sudden, haughty voice. It belonged to a woman who had appeared suddenly on the ruin above them. One look was enough to ascertain that this was no ordinary human. Long jet-black hair was tied back to frame an oval face, and pale yellow eyes regarded them with mocking amusement from above.

Wrapped around and across her chest and midsection was a long, flowing crimson scarf, secured in place by a dark brown belt. It contrasted with the black of the mixture of leather and cloth she wore underneath. The outer layers formed a robe that hung askew yet snugly over her lean hips, while thick leather leggings and near thigh high, black boots completed the other part of her outfit. Her ornamented golden shoulder pad was adorned with beads and feathers as dark as the leathery sleeve protecting her whole left shoulder down to her wrist. It stood in stark disparity against the paleness of the near-naked skin of her right arm.

Taking a few steps forward, Lenya watched how the witch slowly descended the ramp with
confidence and a sauntering grace. "Are you a vulture, I wonder? A scavenger poking amidst a
corpse whose bones have been long since cleaned? Or merely an intruder, come into these
darkspawn filled wilds of mine in search of... easy prey?"

While she wore a skinning knife within the belt around her hips, it was the rough wooden staff
strapped to her back that caused the fools behind her to gasp and step back in fear. Lenya, however,
felt no such urge - quite the contrary. For the first time ever, she found herself wanting to know
more about another person outside of her clan.

Coming to a stop at the end of the stone ramp, the woman's eyes snapped to her, her tone
demanding. "What say you, hmm? Scavenger, or intruder?"

"Neither," Lenya replied, holding her sharp gaze with ease. "But I'm weary of running around in 'your' Wilds, only to find the very thing we came for is missing."

"Missing? Hmm, 'tis most curious. I have watched your progress for some time, you know." She
started to circle around the group in a measured stride, like a predator on a prowl. "'Where do they
go,' I wondered, 'why are they here?' - And now you disturb ashes none have touched for so long.
Why is that?"

Alistair leaned in toward Lenya, his voice a not-so-discreet whispered warning. "Do not speak to
her. She looks Chasind, and that means others may be nearby."

"What?" the witch flashed him a sardonic smile that indicated well enough how little she cared for
his opinion. That she already had in common with her, at least. The woman threw her half-gloved
hands up in a sudden, mocking manner. "You fear barbarians will swoop down upon you?"

"Yeeees, swooooping is baaaad." Ugh. The way the Warden shem dragger and drawled his
words really grated on Lenya's already thin nerves and patience.

"She's a Witch of the Wilds, she is! She'll turn us into toads!" One of the fools behind her thought
it was a good moment to add his own needless, inane comment to the matter. His eyes fixed on the
mage were as wide in fear as a docile deer in front of a hunter's bow. Nor did his hands ever inch
away from the hilts of his daggers.

"Good," Lenya quipped, pointing at the men over her shoulder. "If you do so, please start with the
three idiots behind me."

Amused by the unexpected answer, she turned back to the Dalish. "You seem to be quite
unimpressed by all this, elf. Nor are you afraid. 'Tis curious why a seemingly smart woman travels
with such... simple companions."

"I wonder about that myself actually," Lenya said with shrug of her shoulder. "It was not by
choice, that is for sure."

"Hey!" the Warden shem protested, like an over-sized da'len getting scolded. Lenya couldn't care
less.

Closing the distance between herself and the witch, she crossed her arms. "Amusing as it is to see
them squirming in fear of you like little boys, will you finally tell me what happened to the
contents of that Grey Warden chest?"

"Perhaps." She observed her with open interest as she leaned on the broad trunk of a dead tree. If
you give me your name, Dalish. Let us be civilized."
"En'an'sal'en, my name is Lenya Mahariel of the Sabrae clan," she spoke without thinking and winced as soon as her clan's name went over her lips. Like salt upon an open wound, the mere mention of... them burned inside. "Or...I was ," she added, much quieter, averting her gaze.

"My, such manners." Her fine, dark eyebrow arched up in amusement, but her smile seemed genuine. "What a rare thing to find here in these Wilds. And you may call me Morrigan." Crossing her arms, she let out a long breath. "What you search is here no longer, obviously."

"'Here no longer?' You stole them, didn't you? You're... some kind of... sneaky... witch-thief!"

Look who was talking. The thieving shem accusing others of thieving. Oh, the irony. Lenya's hands flexed into fists. She struggled with the wish to turn around and punch him in the throat just to render him blessedly silent for a creators-damn moment. Instead of giving in to this urge, she rolled her eyes and groaned; in unison with Morrigan, as it turned out.

"...but 'twas not I who took it," she finished, pointedly ignoring his inane comment.

"Who did, then?"

"'Twas my mother, in fact." Pushing herself off the trunk she leaned against, she stalked over to the Dalish. "You do not assume I spawned from a log, do you?"

"A thieving, weird-talking log, perhaps." Unasked, the Warden shem doubled down on comments after being ignored, though he was yet again met with all-too justified indifference.

"So...will you take me to her, then?" Lenya asked and rolled her eyes once more. "Since it seems that we are forbidden from returning without these damn documents. Whatever they are."

"Now that is a sensible request. I like you." Morrigan gave her a look of approval." I can take you to her, yes. Tis not far from here, in fact."

"They are old Grey Warden treaties, and you better give them back!" the Warden shem blustered once more, this time earning himself an annoyed stare from the witch.

"Invoke a name that means nothing to me here, I care not," she sneered at him. "Least of all I care whether you morons follow me back to my mother's hut or cower in fear here." She turned back to Lenya, her tone much friendlier. "Come then. Follow me, if it pleases you."

As intrigued as she was by this human, Lenya did not need to be told twice.

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Morrigan expertly led them through a narrow path with gnarled, old trees towering overhead on both sides, and around bogs they would have surely stumbled in without her guidance. After taking one last turn, the path opened up in a clearing and from behind the low-hanging shroud of mist a withered hut came partly into view. The white haze on the ground seemed to dance and twist around them as they approached the small, slanted building.

Pikes of wood stuck out ominously of its green and halfway muddy grass top roof. Wisps of silver grey smoke curled and danced their way through the thick, hazy air from three fine slits within the roof. Broad lines of moss climbed up the hut's windowless stonewall front like a sickly green
tapestry, clinging to the crevices and cracks within.

In front of its massive door, its wood painted dark with age and decay, stood an old woman who seemed to be expecting them. Her robe was formed mostly of thick brown furs, and the dark leather underneath looked similar to what Morrigan wore.

"Mother, here I bring you the four Wardens..."

"I'm not blind, dear. I can see them-" Morrigan's mother laughed with easy amusement, her shortish white hair shaking with the motion. Her eyes, yellow in color as well, stood out from behind a stripe of jet-black, painted horizontally across her face and eyes. Due to that, Lenya found it hard to look at her- but maybe this was exactly its intended purpose. As the old witch stepped closer to the group to observe them, she felt the three shemlen behind her shrink back from her approach.

"Hmm, as expected," she mused, her voice as dark as the paint around her eyes. Her wrinkly, old and seemingly frail appearance was deceiving, for Lenya could practically feel the magic thrumming in the air and prickling upon her skin - even through the thick leather of her armor. Without a doubt, the old witch was the source of it all.

"Are we supposed to believe you were expecting us?"

Eyes flitting over to the tall Warden, she let out a sharp guffaw. "You are required to do nothing, least of all believe. Shut one's eyes tight or open one's arms wide... either way, one's a fool!"

"Asha'belannar. The woman of many years," Lenya blurted out, so suddenly that all heads turned toward her and stared. Finally, she remembered it again. The stories her clan told in the evenings over the campfire - whispered words of fears and admiration for a powerful witch that had lived amidst the hostile landscape of the Korcari Wilds for many decades, maybe even centuries. "That is what my people call you. You are a friend of the Dalish. Or so they say," she quickly added, fidgeting with the buckle of her armor to quell her nerves.

Her sallow, sunken cheeks rose in a toothy smile. "Ah, you are of the People, of course. So young and bright, and yet so much of you is unknown." Another cackle. "But at least I'm not called old by your kind."

"She is a witch. We shouldn't talk to her; she will turn us into toads."

Her eyes flashed wickedly at one of the two human idiots. "Hmm, actually I'd prefer to cook your flesh and then tear it from your bones." She laughed as they both shuddered, taking delight in their fear. "Such anxious little boys they are, hmm? If you had listened to the young lady, you'd know you don't have to be. I'm just a woman of many years, after all."

"Sooo, this is a dreaded Witch of the Wilds?" the Warden shem drawled, a snort following his words. Unlike the other two humans, he appeared unafraid, somewhat amused even. Odd, considering his open hostility and distrust toward Morrigan before.

Looking at him, Asha'belannar cocked her head with a wicked grin. "Witch of the Wilds, 'eh? Morrigan must have told you that. She fancies such tales, though she would never admit it! Oh, how she dances under the moon." Ending her words with a cackle, she seemingly laughed at her own joke.

Behind her, Morrigan covered her face with her hand and sighed, long and loud. "They did not come to listen to your wild tales, Mother." This was indeed correct, but it was still amusing to see how even age-old witches never failed to embarrass their children. Lenya's mouth twitched as she
observed how Morrigan pinched the bridge of her nose and let out some quiet, yet colorful curses her extended elvhen hearing was able to catch.

"True, they came for their treaties, yes?" came the noncommittal answer with a shrug. She waved her hand, which made the two idiots gasp and step back, and suddenly held a yellowed, rolled up stack of papers. Stepping toward the Warden in their group, she handed it to him. "And before you begin barking, your precious seal wore off long ago. I have protected these."

"You... *protected* them?" The shem looked down, blinking at the documents in his hands.

"And why not?" The many wrinkles in her face deepened further as she frowned, though it was short-lived. "Just remember to tell your Grey Wardens that this blight is bigger than they expect. Or maybe they do expect it. Who am I to know? I'm just a woman of many years with a penchant for moldy parchments. Oh, do not mind me. You have what you came for!" She chuckled lightly before looking at her daughter. "Since those are your guests, Morrigan, lead them out of the Wilds, would you?"

Morrigan let out a displeased groan, but eventually complied with her mother's wish and turned to go. "Very well then. Follow me. *Again.*"

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Thanks to Morrigan's guidance, however reluctant, the way out of the Wilds had been much quicker. Her ability to lead the group around any darkspawn horde helped save much precious time as well. As soon she had been certain they could manage on their own, the witch had quietly slipped away, leaving them standing at Ostagar's gate. Back to where they started so many hours ago.

Lenya regretted seeing her go, though even she found herself glad to be back in camp. While she preferred and felt more comfortable in the wilderness than in a massive stone fortress like Ostagar, the Korcari Wilds were a strange, hostile place barren of any nature she was used to.

"Home sweet home, 'eh, lass?"

Not answering, Lenya shuddered and rubbed her leather-clad arms. The idiot addressing her was not to blame for the sudden goosebumps, however, but a gust of harsh wind, creeping underneath her armor with its briskness. The fading of the sunlight had also meant the fading of the heat. Torches flickered within their wall sconces, their warm yellowish gleam the only source of light in the otherwise pitch black night. She glanced up, seeing the moon standing high and nearly full within a matte black canvas. The stars were hidden behind a solid tuft of clouds. Trekking through the Wilds had taken all day and some of the evening too, leaving her longing for a meal and a bit of rest.

"Well, good to be back, that is for sure," the Warden shem said, rolling his shoulders. "I have to report back to Duncan first, so feel free to clean up and grab a bite to eat." He pointedly looked at her. "Don't stray too far however, since you don't want to miss your own Joining, right?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Yes, that would be such a shame."

"The J-joining?" Ser Whiny Knight did what he had excelled at in the hours before: complaining. Lenya would never understand why humans called such a simpering weakling a *knight*, least of all
why the Warden leader recruited him. "Even more tests? Have I not earned my place?"

"Oh, shut the fuck up," she groused and stormed away.

"Well Jory, you heard the lady," she heard the other idiot say before she had put enough distance between them and herself.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

Except for a few sentences here and there, I scrapped the entire old chapter(s). and only kept the Morrigan and Flemeth scene as they (mostly) happen in canon. Lenya surprised me this chapter about how candid she already was toward Alistair here, even if it was just through an outburst. I had planned to let her be much more stoic/broody, but as always the girl has a mind of her own :)

Visual aids:
I have changed up quite a few things in this chapter that went beyond what is in the (vanilla) game. First of all, in OEaH:R Morrigan doesn't run around in the swamp half-naked with her tits out. Instead, she wears this much better outfit, originating from a mod. Flemeth's look is different too. I use and describe the Concept Art Flemeth Morph. The hut described is not the one in the game but the one shown in the World Of Thedas Vol.2 art

Kudos and especially comments are most appreciated.
Enigma

Chapter Summary

The long awaited conclusion to the Ostagar arc in a meaty chapter. Finally, Lenya will be able to counteract the corruption inside of her with... more corruption? And right after she is tasked to go to a tower with her fellow Warden, and light a beacon there. Easy right? Because whatever could go wrong with that? (Spoiler alert: Everything)

Chapter Notes

Thanks to heffalumps and Moonlightbrunette for beta-reading this chapter.

New day comes again
And it laughs in your face
Whispering secrets of pain
By all its names
What flame could burn out the stain
Of a life misplaced?

-Poets Of The Fall Moonlight Kissed

Despite the lateness of the hour, Ostagar was still abuzz with activity. People stood in groups around a small campfire and talked, while flat-eared servants squirreled about the main area to heed the orders of their masters like good, trained dogs. Lenya headed south, up the stone ramp where the wounded lay on makeshift cots. A young human woman knelt in between two cots and pressed a cloth to the feverish forehead of a soldier. He moaned weakly at intervals, but otherwise didn't move. Lenya couldn't tell if it was the soldier from the Wilds, nor did she care to find out.

Around her, a small group of people dispersed; the shem proclaiming words of their god had fallen silent. Wrinkling her nose, she decided to get away from this depressing place again, though before she was able to said shem nearly ran into her.

The woman wore a wide, odd robe with some sort of sun symbol on its chest, gray and pale red in color. Her creamy-white face was hidden behind a transparent cloth veil, belonging to the even odder hat which left only her mouth visible. "Oh, pardon me, my lady." She took a double take at her, which was unsettling enough, given Lenya couldn't see her eyes hidden by the veil. "Ah, I suspect you are one of the new Grey Wardens?" Not yet, she thought and turned to go, but the shem was nothing if not persistent. "You are a Dalish wanderer, I presume?"

"Wow, figured that out on your own while looking at my vallaslin, huh?" Stopping with a scoff, Lenya turned back to her. "How smart."
Her priorly upturned lips fell into a straight line. Didn't matter, she was full of shit anyway. "There is no need to be so hostile, Warden. The Maker will not refuse to bless you if you are willing to receive Him."

"Oh, and if you are not, He crushes your home and kills your people?" she quipped in the most sarcastic tone possible, while observing how her mouth started to twitch more and more. It was amusing, in a way, how utterly predictable some, if not all, humans were. Especially if one failed to answer or react as they had expected from her. In this case, to smile and accept a foreign god's blessing, one in whose name countless atrocities had been done to her people, like a docile sheep.

Hah, never.

"Then begone with you." The human whirled away with a huff. "I will not entertain your bigotry and hatred."

_Pot meets kettle_, Lenya thought with a shrug and left east toward the kennels.

"He looks better already. I'm sure he'd thank you himself, if he could. Let's give him a day or two to recover." The kennel master, who looked like the Warden leader, smiled at her, obviously pleased with her ability to retrieve the flower. "Why not come back after the battle? Perhaps we can see about imprinting him on you."

Lenya frowned up at him. "Imprinting?"

"Oh right, you Dalish don't have dogs, least of all mabari, right?"

She shook her head, finding no offense in his words. It was true, after all. "We don't own animals like shemlen do. It is wrong, unnatural."

"Well," he breathed out a laugh. "Then you are in luck, for a Mabari isn't owned. It chooses its master for itself and forms an equal, lifelong bond with them. Which is what we call 'imprinting'."

"I see," she hummed, unsure if she even wanted to commit to such a thing. "Would that even be possible?"

"Maybe. It's likely he understands that you're responsible for curing him, since Mabari are at least as smart as your average tax collector. Come back after the battle and just... take another look," he said, stepping forward to put some small round, metallic objects into her hands. "Before I forget, here is something for your trouble."

Lenya looked down and recognized it as money. Oddly enough, she had found some of it on the corpses of darkspawn earlier. Creators knew _why_ even. Probably because they looked shiny? Then again, these rotten bastards had no sense for beauty or possessions, only for destruction and death.

_Gods, she hated them._

And still, just like them, she had no sense of how much the money she held now was worth or what it could buy. Growing up within the borders of her clan, there had never been a need for a
currency. All items, weapons and food were distributed and shared equally among the clan. It had always been a given to do so, as natural as breathing. Only a few selected hunters who traded with outside sources were knowledgeable in these matters. Lenya, considered too young and too brash for these delicate affairs by the elders, hadn't been one of them.

Pocketing the coins in her belt bag, she decided to find out their worth from the one merchant she had seen still up and about. There was still enough time before meeting the others for the big, grand Joining the Warden shem never could shut up about. Of course the damn Felasil hadn't even told her where it would take place. Typical.

She had found the place after all - and immediately wished she hadn't.

"Not all who drink the blood will survive, and those who do are forever changed. This is why the Joining is a secret. It is the price we pay."

Lenya stared at the Warden leader, who had just gutted the Whiny Knight for refusing to drink the darkspawn blood after the other idiot had choked to death on it. Well, at least she hadn't wasted time learning their names. Overall, it was somehow a fitting continuation for a very shitty day.

It had grown deathly silent. Aside from her own heartbeat racing in her ears and her frenzied breathing, there was no sound. The Warden shem had shrunken back to the opposite wall, not daring to look at her or his leader anymore. Glancing down at Duncan's hand, she saw him holding his dagger. From its tip still dripped blood, which also continued to pour out of the shem's now limp body on the ground.

As the wind turned, the air carried the rusty scent of freshly spilled blood to her, making her stomach turn. She had never been squeamish, but seeing someone getting killed was different than taking an active part in it. Lenya could taste the bile on her tongue and tried to swallow it again as sweat started to bead on her forehead. Her eyelids fluttered, and the place around her began spinning. No, no, no. She would not pass out like a dainty human princess after seeing some blood. It wasn't only that, however, but the accumulation of many things finally coming to a head. Exhaustion, hunger, thirst - basic needs ignored all day, on top of the corruption roaring inside of her. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to stay afloat, on her feet. Lenya swallowed heavily, yet more and more bile rose up, filling her mouth.

Somewhere, somehow, she heard her name being called. It sounded distant, like it was coming from worlds away. Armored footsteps upon stone formed a cumbersome staccato, its sound drawing closer every second. Then they stopped, unlike the bile that had now turned her nausea into heaving. Bending over, Lenya emptied the scarce contents of her stomach at its - his - feet, a fitting sentiment to it all. As soon she had regained some semblance of control over her body, she whipped around to rush toward the closeby stone pillar.

"You cannot leav-"

"Maker, Duncan, give her a moment!" His tone was barbed and clipped, speaking of anger even to her momentarily muffled hearing.

Lenya would have stopped to wonder why this shem raised his voice against his idolized leader for
her were it not for her overwhelming nausea. Hands on her knees, she continued to heave and spit into the patch of grass until nothing was left. Trembling, her knees threatened to buckle under her. To counteract it and stabilize herself, she put a hand against the stone and welcomed its cool solidness underneath her clammy fingertips. She gasped in short, rapid breaths, then slowed down for more even, longer intakes of air. They quickly morphed into laughter that scratched within her throat, demanding release. It was madness. Her laughter was too, yet most of all the notion of counteracting the corruption inside of her with even more corruption.

This was no cure.

But what choice did she have? She was dead either way. It didn’t matter if she tried to run as if Fen’harel were at her heels or choked on darkspawn blood like the human had. And even if she succeeded in outrunning this damn Dahn’direlan once more, the corruption inside would soon kill her...or worse. She had heard stories. Vague yet clear tales which made her want to turn around and start heaving again. Her laughter subsided. No, what she must do was obvious. She couldn’t give up or give in to this sickness, not now. Not ever. Tamlen... she squeezed her eyes shut against the agony twisting and ripping at her insides. She couldn't even complete the sentence in her mind. What she could do, however, was turn back and face them –

So with one last deep intake of oxygen, ignoring the metallic tang of blood upon her tongue, Lenya did exactly that. For she was Dalish, and she wouldn't submit. Not to the sickness nor to the darkspawn. Especially not to the darkspawn, those fucking bastards. To the taint? Yes, it was a necessary evil, not only in order to survive but also to be able to combat them more effectively. Should she still perish upon drinking, ugh, that, she swore she would return from the Beyond as evil spirit to haunt these damn humans and their shitty order of tainted idiots forever.

Lenya gave the dark-skinned leader shem a baleful glare as she forcefully ripped the silver chalice out of his hands. Lasa adahl su nar masa. "Fuck you," she spat in his direction, and drank.

Alistair caught her before she could hit the ground- again. Somehow, this seemed to have become a pattern between them. The same could be said of her tendency to insult the people around her before passing out.

The thought would have amused him if he weren't too scared out of his mind to appreciate its existence. Two of the recruits, his recruits, already lay dead on the ground. He couldn't bear adding a third to the list, not her. As rude, volatile and maddening as she could be, she was also –

"She'll live," Duncan announced after feeling her pulse point, having taken too long to do so.

His eyes, which had been screwed shut, flew open, and he looked at her for the first time since she had lifted the cup to her lips. "Thank the Maker!" Alistair breathed and felt a weight the size of a mountain drop from his shoulders.

He didn't miss the odd look Duncan gave him at that, nor the fact that she - Lenya - was currently nestled in his (armored) lap with her head.

"Losing two recruits was brutal. I'm simply glad the third and last one survived at least," he said, too quickly and awkwardly.

"Uh huh." There was that look again. "As long you remember that your duty must always come
first, Alistair."

"Maker, Duncan, being glad she survived doesn't equal wanting to marry her!" Right after the sentence had been spoken, he groaned inwardly at the wording of it. *Keep digging your hole, Alistair; you may reach Orlais yet.*

"Uh huh," he said again, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Fine," he glowered up at his mentor, who was back on his feet. "You know what, yeah. I'm going to invite you to our wedding. All will be draped in Warden blue, griffons will circle majestically over our heads, and the Mabari she had a soulful conversation with and picked flowers for will be the ringbearer. There - better?"

*Bonjour, my name is Alistair. Is this Orlais?*

Duncan's mouth twitched. "Griffons are extinct; I thought you knew that."

"Haha, very funny."

"I hope you know why I did that..."

"What? Teasing me? Because you are – oh, *that.*" Alistair glanced quickly at Jory's bloodied body. "Yeah," he muttered, quieter than he meant to, and frowned. "It is just... all this death..."

"Everyone can die in battle, Alistair. You, me, the soldiers that have sworn fealty to the king, or our fellow Wardens. With the battle so close, some even will die." He sighed to release the tension within him, then his expression hardened again. "All that matters is that the Blight is stopped. At any cost. This is our duty and calling as Grey Wardens."

"Yeah," he repeated, but his heart wasn't in it. Not after seeing Jory be gutted. However needed Duncan proclaimed it to be to protect the order's secrets, his death simply seemed so... senseless. 'At any cost' suddenly sounded more like a curse than a motto.

Duncan appeared to sense his apprehension and nudged his shoulder. "Hard day, huh?"

"Hmm," Alistair hummed and smiled slightly at the mirroring of his earlier words. "I suppose tomorrow won't be any better, huh?"

Very briefly, he grimaced. "All signs are indicating the that battle will take place tomorrow, possibly in the late afternoon."

"So that is a big fat no, then. Great."

"Have faith, Alistair. The Blight cannot be allowed to spread, so it has to end here. It will end here."

*Now you sound like my weird half-brother.*

"But... first, let us get our new sister somewhere... safe." Duncan peered down at her. She was still sleeping soundly, and Alistair doubted even an archdemon could wake her. "Take her to our camp and then get some rest. You will need it."

He cleared his throat and pointed into the general direction of the bodies. "What about... *them*?"

"I'll deal with that. We will have time to mourn them later." Duncan's lips quirked upwards, if only for second or two. "You better take care of your bride-to-be."
"Very funny, Duncan. Gotta laugh later, though, since I'm busy now." With that, he lifted her into his arms, quietly praying she wouldn't wake up on the long way back - or the impending battle would be the least of his worries.

Alistair heard Junan long before he was able to see him. The giant man jumped up from his place at the large bonfire within their camp.

"Haha, I knew she would pull through." He turned around with a grin toward the freckled, bearded face behind him. "Pay up, Benson."

Still with Lenya in his arms, he stared at them, baleful. "You bet on who would survive?"

"Nothing personal, Alistair." Junan shrugged. "Being a Warden for as long as I have, it's just our way of coping with the stress of a Joining."

"Yeah, that is not twisted or wrong at all."

"What about the other ones?" Benson asked, despite probably already knowing the answer. Alistair only shook his head. "Damn, I thought Daveth would survive as well at least. He would have been a good Warden." He motioned him to follow. "We have prepared a tent you can put her down in. Several, in fact, though we won't need the other ones anymore, I guess." Quiet as his voice was, he sounded sad? It was weird to see their roles reversed now. Normally Junan was the more thoughtful person, whereas Benson, well, tended to enjoy life to its fullest. Especially those with the letter 'w'; wine and women. Shaking off the thought, he put Lenya down on the prepared bedroll in the narrow tent and closed the flap on his way out.

"Hey Deyron, did you hear?" Junan yelled across the encampment, almost hyper with glee. "You finally get company!"

"Great." The dark-skinned elf let out an noncommittal grunt, waving him off. "Is this the point where you assume that all elves know each other?"

"What?" His face fell. "No, of course not. I'm sorry."

"Ah, don't be. I'm just fucking with you." Deyron snorted."You humans are so gullible."

"What? You fucking with me? Such a lie."

His laugh rang brightly through the night. "Come over and we can change that, darling."

Maker's breath. Alistair glared into their general direction.

"We better hide or claim the rest of the alcohol for ourselves, or else they will be going at it all night." Stopping at how that sounded, Benson grimaced. "That came out wrong. Or maybe not. They really should it get out of their systems. They bicker like an old married couple for weeks now."

Oh. Once more his own inexperience with the subject matter showed. "But I thought-"

"Junan preferring women? Maybe he does." His thick shoulders lifted to a shrug. "There is such a thing as having a varied taste, Junior. You will learn what I mean." Another shrug. "...Or you stay with your girl instead. Everything is fine. Being able to choose is what matters."

"She is not--" Alistair stopped with a sigh. "Wait... what brought this on?" He squinted at him. "Are
you drunk, is that it?"

"Nah, it is just... in the face of one's own mortality, every man gets humble." Benson took a large swig out of his bottle and wiped his ginger mustache with the back of his hand when he was done. "The battle is tomorrow and I wanna approach it with clean sheet." He paused. "Well, _cleaner_. So I wanna apologize for dragging you into the Pearl. It had obviously not been what you wanted."

Distracted by the tirade Galen fired at Junan and Deylon for disturbing his sleep, Alistair reacted belatedly to this unexpected apology. "I.. _wow_. I appreciate that, really." He heard both of them protesting in a whirl of words before they fell silent, giving in to the Constable's order.

"Come sit with me, Alistair." Benson patted the empty space beside him, next to the warming flames of the campfire. With the commotion being over and dealt with now, only quiet chatter of the fellow Wardens around him remained. Most had already retreated into their tents, wary of the day and battle tomorrow. Alistair shuddered as a chill raced down his spine, and the cold wasn't to blame for it. He didn't look forward to night's sleep, despite his exhaustion reaching near bone-deep. The tension around him and the feel of the approaching horde had become too palpable for that.

He offered him the other bottle of wine he'd cradled in his lap. "A drink? You look like as if you need one. Or... several."

"No, thank you." He plopped down on the log beside Benson, and started to tug at the buckles of his armor. Most of the time he welcomed its comforting weight. Now however, he couldn't wait to get rid of it and dress down to his gambeson; maybe even switch to _normal_ clothes. A bit of water to clean up would be nice too. Working on the buckles of his greaves, he grinned up to him. "I'm not really in the spirit for _spirits_."

Beside him, Benson cringed visibly. "Dammit Junior, I am not yet drunk enough for your particular brand of jokes." Yeah, it hadn't been his most clever one, that was for sure. Alistair didn't even know _why_ he said that. Maybe to cheer his fellow Warden up, or himself. Alas, it did not work either way.

After that, both remained quiet a long while. Alistair effectively removed his armor piece by piece and stored the parts in a neat pile beside him. He would clean them later, or tomorrow before the battle. Benson only took a pull out of his bottle here and there, while watching him dress down to his gambeson and breeches.

"So how did it go exactly?" Benson asked, after being silent for so long.

The breastplate was the final part he put on the pile, before he glanced at the older man. "Huh?"

"The Joining. What happened?"

Alistair made a face. He wasn't exactly keen to discuss the details of it. "Daveth and Jory weren't strong enough to withstand the taint, obviously."

"Yeah, I noticed that, Junior." Rolling his eyes, he scratched his stubbled chin. "But I rather meant the Dalish."

"Lenya?" He blinked, surprised by his interest in her. Which he probably shouldn't be, given that she was their newest full-fledged Warden.

"Yeah, your girl. Soo?"
Hardly able to suppress the groan upon how Benson kept calling her *that*, he reverted back to the familiarity of sarcasm. "Oh you know, couldn't have been better, really. First she puked on Duncan's shoes, then ran off to the side to finish it there. Coming back, she ripped the chalice out of his hands, and drank. Not without insulting him first, of course."

"Hah, that girl has fire, good for her. The coming months certainly won't be boring with our newest addition."

"That...is one way to put it. She is-" Well, *what* exactly? After the Joining Duncan had interrupted him before he could complete the thought. Now where Alistair had the time to think, he failed to put it in words. "-something," he finished lamely, unsatisfied by his choice of word.

"Aye, I noticed." His laugh was deep, chortling. "And I drink to that."

Just as the silence had settled in again between the two men, Duncan appeared within their camp. He went straight toward the bonfire and Alistair. "There you are," his mentor said to him. "Good."

He paused for a long intake of air, and drove a hand through his slightly disheveled dark hair. While his face was free of blood now, his armor was still splattered crimson. Like himself, his mentor seemed not had had the time to clean up.

Benson glanced past Alistair at their leader, and frowned. "Commander, you look like you need a drink. And hours of sleep." Sometimes the man sounded more like a nagging mother than a seasoned, middle-aged warrior and Warden.

"Not now. All in good time, Benson," he replied, turning back to Alistair. "Go wake your Warden sister. We have urgent matter to attend."

"Again?" Slowly but sure, Alistair was asking himself if the evening would ever end.

"Yes. The King expects our attendance at his war council. This includes you and our new Warden."

"Huh," Benson mused. "I wonder why he would want two rookies -no offense, Alistair- to partake at his war council?"

Duncan fixed him with a sharp look. "It is not up to you, nor me to question the King's decision. We are here at his behest, and you would do well to remember that."

"Aye, aye, ser!" his fellow Warden muttered, rather sarcastically, and sunk back into his seat.

"Well, you better fetch your girl then," he said to Alistair, fidgeting with his quite impressive stash of wine bottles at his feet. "Don't want to keep the King waiting, after all." He handed him one of the open but untouched bottles with a slight grin. "Here take this. She will need it."

Alistair hesitated a moment before taking it. "Why..." he trailed off, while grasping the reason for Benson's generous offer. "...oh *right*."

"I will go ahead," Duncan announced, looking at Alistair. "Please follow to the upper part of the ruins, as soon as you are able. The council is held close by where the Joining took place." Finished with his explanation, Duncan left him to his fate of being the one having to disturb the Dalish's well deserved slumber.

Her tent was erected nearby, diagonally opposite from the main campfire. Ducking into it with half his body, Alistair saw her still lying on her back, unmoving. "Hey..." His voice was gentle, though he didn't dare to touch her. "Wake up." As expected, or rather, *feared*, she didn't. Lenya continued to sleep like a log; the exhaustion caused by a long day seemed to finally have caught up with her.
As much he'd have preferred to let her rest, especially after what happened at the Joining, he couldn't. Not when the King - his half-brother - was the one requesting them to attend.

Sighing, Alistair entered her tent completely, while his heart hammered in his chest. He knelt down next to her bedroll. "Please don't murder me for waking you," he muttered before reaching out to touch her shoulder to give it a gentle shake. The effect of it was almost immediate. Gasping awake, Lenya started up, eyes wide and unfocused. The gleam of the firelight nearby reflected brightly in her dilated pupils, akin to the eyes of cats. He had seen it before with the few elven fellow Wardens in their ranks, but never so... up close.

"Hi." Alistair waved his hand in front of her face. "Sorry to wake you, but -"

"Ugh," she made, sticking out her tongue in a grimace of disgust, and coughed. Oh, right. The famous taste of lingering darkspawn blood after the Joining. He wished he could forget it, but unfortunately it was etched forever into his memories and taste buds.

"Wait a moment." Alistair reached for the bottle of wine left outside the tent and handed it to her. Ripping it out his hand like she had done with the Joining chalice earlier, Lenya took a mouthful of wine and swished vigorously. Turning her head to the other side, she spat it out again, as far away from her bedroll as she could muster. She repeated that a few more times before allowing herself to swallow the liquid.

Her breath came out in a harsh rhythm and she grimaced again, eyeing the bottle in her hands now. "What is that?"

"Wine," Alistair supplied, ever so helpful.

"Tastes like halla piss."

He chuckled. "Well, better than darkspawn blood, right?"

"Barely."

"I would love to officially welcome you to the Wardens, but sadly we are lacking the time for a big party."

Looking at him, her eyebrows drew together. "Wait... how did I get here? And why are you here, of all people?"

Ouch. "You passed out after drinking darkspawn blood, remember? So you, um, were brought here, to the Grey Warden main camp." Alistair omitted the fact that he was the one who carried her here, since he liked to be alive.

"Okay..." Lenya digested the information for a moment. "...Still doesn't explain you being in here, with me."

"I was trying to wake you up, obviously. The King wants us to attend his war council."

"How nice for him. Now go away." Right after, she lay herself back down onto the bedroll, with her face and body turned away from him.

Alistair gaped at her back, momentarily at a loss for her reaction. "Um, I said 'us', right? This includes you as well."

"The shemlen is not my King."
"Right." Alistair suppressed the wish to roll his eyes. He should have expected this answer. "But you are a Grey Warden now and the King requested the attendance of Wardens. Particularly of us two." Somehow it was like talking to a child, at least right now. "Look, I know it has been a long day, but you can rest after this is over. And you should, since the battle is tomorrow."

That made her turn around. She stared up at him. "What?"

"You can't feel it - them. Not yet, anyway." A chill raced down his spine, the same unsettling kind he felt earlier. Alistair shuddered. "But the horde is steadily closing in. They are said to arrive at Ostagar in massive numbers tomorrow afternoon. Hence why the King holds a war council so late in the evening, I guess."

The sigh Lenya huffed out ended in a groan. She sat up and crossing her arms, her eyes narrowed at him. "Ugh. Fine, I'm coming. Wait outside, then."

Happy to find her agreeable after all, Alistair smiled at her. "That's my-" His mouth plopped shut and very briefly he forgot how to move, or to breathe. He felt rooted in place, mortified by the one word he nearly would have said out loud. _Girl_. It played as a mocking echo within his mind, even as he attempted to somehow salvage the situation. "-new fellow Warden," he finished lamely, and outright fled from her tent.

_Maker's breath._ Heart racing and blushing furiously, Alistair let his head fall into his hands with a groan. Right after the council, he was going to _kill_ Benson for calling Lenya 'his girl' as often as he did. Even before the darkspawn would have any chance tomorrow.

"You are a very strange human," she stated, appearing so suddenly next to him that it caused him to jump. Alistair made a mental note to buy and make her wear a little bell which would announce her arrival in advance. Right after he was finished digging the hole to hide in forever, of course.

Looking up to the starless sky, he took a deep breath of the night's crisp air to calm down again.

_Motioning her to follow, Alistair chuckled ruefully. "You know, you are not the first to tell me that."

As Lenya had expected, participating at the council had been a giant waste of her time. She still didn't know why she had agreed to it in the first place. Unsurprisingly, the shemlen king was still the same _felaslan_ chasing glory and tales that could only lead to doom. And the army shemlen in which all these human fools were putting all their hopes of winning? There was something... unsettling about him, more than with any other shemlen she'd met so far. At least Lenya, together with the Warden shem, would be far away from the main battlefield, lightening some beacon in a tower. A fact about which the tall human sitting across the campfire still seemed to be sulking about.

"I don't like this... Loghain shem," Lenya announced into the silence that had settled over them, ever since their return from... _that_. Most of the other Wardens had already retreated to their tents, leaving the place around the campfire empty. Though with the darkspawn blood still lingering upon her tongue and ghastly pictures of its horde in her mind, Lenya didn't feel like sleeping yet.

The human had his arms wrapped around his knees, and stared into the flames. Even without his otherwise perpetual Warden uniform, his stature was still imposing. His broad shoulders sank further down as he snorted. "You don't like anyone, Lenya."
"True," she confessed, unfazed. "Nor do I need to." *Least of all shemlen.* "But he has something... unsettling. It is his eyes, I think."

He gave her a quick, sharp look. "Teyrn Loghain is our best chance of winning the battle tomorrow. He is a national hero and his expertise in warfare and strategy is unmatched. But you don't like him because of his eyes?"

Of course the humans would band together and defend each other, like a pack of wolves. Her expression hardened to a scowl. "Forget I said anything, shemlen."

"Right..." The shemlen sighed, with a scowl of his own. "Already done."

Ignoring his needless quip, Lenya focused on preparing healing salves out of the herbs collected and purchased. An unprepared hunter was a bad one, after all. For a while the rhythmic clunking of the wooden mortar and pestle became the only sound filling the night's air.

"Did you have dreams?" he asked so suddenly that her hands stilled with the sound of his voice.

"What?"

"After the Joining, I mean," he said, looking at her. "I had terrible dreams."

Her grip around the pestle tightened to a point of near pain as the memories right after the Joining kept flooding back into her mind. Right after the vile concoction had passed her lips, it had left fire in its wake, burning her from the inside. Akin to the fever of the Blight sickness, but far more intense. Then the pictures and voices of darkspawn and... a dragon? had filled her mind, ripping, scratching; a chaotic world of ash and sickly light. All at once and way too much. The ensuing blackness as she passed out soon after had been a blessing in disguise.

She forced her arm to relax, to release the object within her hands. The pestle clattered faintly as it dropped into the vessel. "I don't want to talk about it."

His gaze still lingered at her, much longer than needed. "I... see." The human reached then behind him and resurfaced with a silvery object in his hand. It was a small necklace, she noticed. "Duncan gave me this and, well, it is for you." Leaning forward, he pressed it into her bare hand. It was cold and hard to the touch.

"A gift?" Lenya stared dumbly at the cheap and downright ugly jewelry. "You are giving me a gift?" Everything in her bristled against the notion, even if, objectively seen, the human couldn't possibly know about the meaning of gift-giving in her culture. This, however, did not make her loathe the object within her hand any less.

"Nooo?" he drawled, noticing her ire. "It's given to all Wardens as a way to remember the brothers and sisters we lost in the ritual."

Lenya gave it a closer look. Shaped like a teardrop, the delicate silver vial seemed heavier than it had a right to be. "We call it the Warden's Oath. Most of us choose to wear it at all times to signify the burdens we carry," he continued to explain, his voice solemn."It contains a portion of the darkspawn blood we used in the Joining."

"Eww." Now this was just... disgusting. Was it not enough how she couldn't escape their taint and corruption anymore? Did she have to wear their blood not only within her veins but also around her neck like a sick, twisted trophy? "I don't want it."

The shem glared at first at her outstretched arm with the necklace, then at her. His voice dropped
lower, adapting a biting sarcastic undertone. "Too bad, it is yours. No take backsies. Like you being a Grey Warden now. Get used to it."

"What?" Lenya couldn't believe her ears, nor his audacity. Anger boiled up like a hot wave and pounded at the sides of her skull. "I had a life before this, shem. A good life, with my people, my clan. I was good in my role there, content as a hunter. I never asked to be here, to fight a shemlen battle. I wanted none of it!"

His hazel-colored eyes narrowed upon her with a sneer. "And yet you are here. Must suck then, huh?"

"You know, I wanted to thank you for speaking up for me earlier before the Joining." Blinking away angry tears, Lenya jumped up from her seat. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. Not now, not ever. "But honestly? Fuck you! You shemlen are all the same!"

"Oh how very mature," he snapped back at her in the same loud voice. The human was also on his feet and looming over her with his sheer body mass and height.

Glaring up at him for another moment, the Dalish whirled round and stormed off toward her tent. The necklace made a satisfying hissing sound as she threw it in the fire, which of course this asshole noticed.

"How dare you? You can't do that!" Predictably, he was livid about its destruction. Good. Lenya noticed him following her, only a mere step or two behind. "Hey!" Still she didn't stop her flight until she had reached her tent and closed the flaps behind her. Just in time to bite her fist in the effort to muffle her sobs, she no longer could hold at bay.

"Leave her be, Alistair!" she heard the Warden leader's voice say. He must have been woken up by their fight and its sheer volume.

"But she disrespects everything we stand for!" The shemlen's shadow loomed still large through the thin canvas of her tent, as if rooted in place. Even if she didn't want to see or hear them, she had to. Unlike with the aravals made of thick, sturdy wood to endure and protect against cold winters, a tent was only an imitation of a place, with the mere illusion of privacy. Trying to ignore his shadow and presence demanding her to come back, to justify herself to him, like a good elf should in presence of a human, she knelt down to her bedroll.

Never again shall we submit, Lenya thought in defiance. Though doing so only added another pang of wistfulness to the painful realization of how alone and lost she felt here in their camp. It wasn't hers, especially not ours and never would be. A shuddering whimper escaped between the fist pressed within her mouth, far too loud. She hated herself for it, for this weakness, and everything else of it, too.

The Warden leader sighed out loud, then there was a rustling sound of a tent's flaps being open. "Come here, Alistair," he said and finally the shadow in front of tent reluctantly moved away, until it had vanished from her blurred, teary-eyed sight. She thought of them then, her people, and wondered what they did right now. New tears formed within her eyes, leaving a wet, burning trail in its wake as they rolled down her cheeks. Did they miss her too? Or were they glad to be finally rid of their troublemaker?

Oh Tamlen, she thought, his name leaden with guilt in her mind. What have I done?

"Have I ever told you how I was recruited into the Wardens?" she heard Duncan ask the other human as she curled herself into a ball on the bedroll, making herself as small as possible. Not
being able to sleep, Lenya listened to his story of being a former thief targeting the wrong person and being conscripted as punishment. Of an expedition to some place called The Deep Roads with the former king soon after and of his elven mage friend long ago, until the Beyond finally finally claimed her for fitful slumber.

Flemeth cocked her head as she squinted up at the sudden charcoal sky. Clotted black clouds sprawled across the horizon, billowing in from the south, along with the horde, she knew. Sickly violet lightning forked through the gray pall, almost in tune with the rolling thunder. Rain started to pour down, heavy like stones. It drenched Flemeth's fur robe in mere moments.

And yet the old witch didn't move. She outstretched her arms to the sides and cackled. Everything was as she had it foretold.

"Is it time, mother?" Morrigan's approach silenced her laughter, if only long enough for a reply.

"Yes, my dear. It indeed is. Be so kind and prepare everything for our soon arriving guests, yes?"

Flemeth could practically hear the roll of her daughter's eyes as she sighed. "Yes, mother. I will."

"Good girl." She turned back, her golden gaze fixed toward the sky as her limbs slowly grew, shifting into something much bigger. They twisted further into a gigantic mass of muscles and scales, until her old humanoid form no longer existed. Flemeth roared out and shook the earth with its volume. Beating her massive wings, she soared into the blackened sky, toward her goal.

If everything was indeed how the witch had foreseen it, she already knew exactly where to find them.

"Maker's breath! What are these darkspawn doing ahead of the rest of the horde? There wasn't supposed to be any resistance here!"

Halting on the top of the stairs to the first floor of the damn tower they had fought their way through, the Warden shem never failed to point out the obvious. Thunder cracked outside, mixing with the dull roar of battle, which halted her reply.

Lenya turned to him and rolled her eyes. "Perhaps you can try telling them then how they are in the wrong place?"

"Hah, yes," he snorted, using his perpetual sarcasm. "Of course it is all just a misunderstanding. We will laugh about later!"

Lenya let out a groan. She still hadn't forgiven him for last night, despite his attempt to clear the air prior to the battle. And given his still caustic tone toward her, the apology could only have been meant halfhearted. Stuck as she was with the shem here in the tower, it was all moot anyway.

"At any rate, we need to hurry and to get up to the top of the tower to light the signal fire in time!" he nearly yelled, sounding somewhat panicked. "Teyrn Loghain will be waiting for the signal!"
"Yes, because you haven't mentioned this in the last five minutes. So thanks for reminding me, fellow Warden!" Giving her an irritated look for the comment, the human took the helm, running forward as eager as a halla calf finding its first clover in spring. The two other shemlen men, a mage and a warrior, whom they had found outside the tower warning them of the darkspawn, followed his questionable lead into the new area. Her fingers clasped around her blades and with a prayer to Elger'nan, she set herself into motion, ready for another fight.

What both Wardens lacked in verbal understanding, they equaled out with battle prowess. Lenya had noticed it before, in the Wilds, that he was far above average with his fighting abilities. It was a bit raw around the edges and too eager, maybe, though her own training was far from being perfected yet. Of course it sufficed enough to survive here and slay whatever simple-minded darkspawn mistook her for easy prey, but her clan's hunter training didn't exactly include the killing of them or other otherworldly beasts. However, being a hunter also meant being able to adapt to new, unexpected situations, to improvise in order to make the kill in the end of a hunt.

And so Lenya fell in step with her fellow Warden, observed where he struck and where he missed, then add her own attack. Finding a rhythm with him here came with frightening ease, especially given how they were like fire and water otherwise. Though here, in fighting, their disparity paid off. Where he applied raw strength and force, Lenya completed the attacks with finesse, speed and dexterity. Using an opening was easy when the aggression of the opponent was drawn to the taller, broader target, or if it was stunned by a bash of his griffon-winged kite shield. Of course she was by far not passive in her own attacks, offering her fellow Warden equally as many opportunities for a kill as he did for her. This method made quick work of every group of darkspawn encountered, letting them progress through the first floor faster than thought.

Having cleared the large area of darkspawn with the aid of some mabari hounds released from their cages, the tower guard rested his hands on his knees. He looked at her while gasping for air. "You are a good fighter for a -"

"Yes, I am." She whirled round to the human, her bloodied blades still in hands. The implication of his sentence made her want to use them on him. "And if you would be a better one, shemlen, I wouldn't have to do all the work."

"Now now," the mage raised his free hand in the effort to placate. "Let us rather concentrate on reaching the beacon than to argue."

"Yes, exactly." Lenya suppressed the urge to groan. As good her fellow Warden was whenever he concentrated on stabbing things, as irritating she found him whenever he opened his mouth. "The stairs to the second and last floor must be not far from here. I think it is across the other room."

"Oh, the one with the closed door and a horde behind it?"

He threw her a lopsided grin over his shoulder. "Yeeep. You know the drill."

Of course reaching the beacon and simply being able to light it would have been too easy. There had to be a at least ten feet tall creature in their way.

The monster's head perked up at the sound of their approach, and it swung round to face them. Its scarred, leathery skin was a dull blue-gray in color, with crude leather armor bits tied to its muscular frame and limbs with lengths of rope and chain. Thick, twisted horns stuck from each side of its massive forehead, looking similar to a corrupted and very ugly version of a halla. The beast's scarred face contorted into a snarl of rage, its wide mouth baring large fangs partly yellow with decay and partly crimson from its feast. Blood still dripped from the corners of it's mouth, and
strips of human flesh were hurled in their direction as it roared.

Grimacing, Lenya side-stepped the bloodied projectiles and spittle, and readied her blades. She shot a glance toward her fellow Warden. "Let me guess, this is an ogre?"

Open-mouthed he stared at it, like the other two humans behind him. Gripping his shield harder, he only nodded.

"Well then..." She glared up at it, her mind already searching for a point of attack. "... I hope you are done soiling your underwear."

"Y-yes, of course." He exhaled rapidly as he stabilized his stance. "Let's do this."

Due to the sheer mass of the beast, it was easier said than done. Its thick hide caused most of their attacks to be ineffective. A bolt of the tower guard's crossbow whizzed past her head and bore itself into the ogre's chest, giving them momentarily respite.

"Weak points?" Lenya yelled at him, already moving away from where she stood. Remaining in place would mean a certain death after all. "You are the Warden here."

"Funny," he gasped, stabbing the back of its massive foot. "And here I thought I saw you drinking darkspawn blood." The ogre howled out in pain and quickly lashed around. Observing her fellow Warden, an idea came to her mind. Naturally the monster was unlike anything she ever fought or hunted before, yet still somewhat similar to a bear in mannerism. Unlike a bear however it depended on its two stumpy feet, instead of being able to alter its stance like the forest animal. Taking away that mobility would rob the ogre almost all of its deadliness and turn it into easy prey.

"What you did worked," Lenya yelled toward him, and broke into a sprint. She ducked under its massive claws grabbing for her and slid in between the gap of its feet to reach its backside. "Keep its focus on you!"

"What?"

She slashed her blade across the tendril of one foot. "Just do it!"

Its outcry as it momentarily sank to its feet proved her instincts to be right. Just as Lenya wanted to repeat the attack at the other foot, the ogre lashed out blindly, maddened by pain. Being one step too late, its wide sweep hurled her fellow Warden into a stack of barrels.

"No. No. Shit," she cursed, thankful for the directly ensuing electric current of the mage, which stunned the beast long enough to finally complete her action. The ground shook with the ogre's mass as it fell down, rendered immobile but still alive. Running up to it, Lenya jumped on its chest to slit its throat, keenly aware of its claws still being able to crush her. It took her several attempts to get a clean, lethal cut across the correct artery of its neck, but eventually the ogre stilled and bled out on the tower's floor.

Sheathing her bloodied weapons in a haste, Lenya ran over to the barrels on the adjacent side, afraid of what she would find there. The human lay within its splintered, wooden remains and did not move. Her gloved fingers jolted to her belt bag, hoping to find the vial of magic potion there the elder mage had gifted her before the battle. Thankfully the vial was still in her bag, its glass unbroken. Lenya uncorked it with shaky fingers. To be able to give it to him however, she needed him to be awake first. Kneeling down next to his unconscious body, she saw his armored chest rising up and down. He was still breathing. Oh good. She repeatedly patted his face. "Hey... wake up!"
"Is he-" one of the shemlen behind her tried to ask.

"Shut up," she snapped into their general direction, cutting off his words. No, he is not. He couldn't. As annoying as he was, death wasn't something she would wish upon him. "Creators, you stupid human, wake up, damnit!" Still nothing, but she tried anew, with a gentle shove this time. "...Alistair!"

His eyes flew open, as if reacting to the unusual sound of his name on her lips. He yelped in a labored breath, right before his face contorted to a mask of pain. "Oww," he managed, bringing his hand up to hold his side.

"Here, drink this." Lenya helped him to sit up, at least far enough to be able to swallow the potion.

"Did I... -" His words were interrupted by small gulps as he downed the concoction. The magic effect of it was almost immediate and... Alistair's prior pained breathing normalized. Enough for him to speak and complete his sentence even, alas. "... hit my head too much, or did you call me by name just now?"

Jumping back up to her feet, Lenya turned away with a huff. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her expression.

Sitting up, he looked past her bloodied form toward the ogre's massive corpse in the middle of the room. He chuckled, a low sound. "You... really did it. Wow. ... You are really good."

She whirled back to face him and glared down at him. "And why is everyone so surprised about that?"

"I'm not. I have seen you fight before, remember?" her fellow Warden stated, matter of fact. The tower guard offered him a hand to pull him him back up, which he took. "And for what it is worth, Lenya, I'm sorry for last night," he said while picking up his sword and shield from the ground. "Being a Warden means so much for me, so it is hard to grasp if someone doesn't appreciate it. But I'm, um, glad you made it through the Joining."

"You definitely have hit your head too much," Lenya muttered under her breath, feeling the need to get away from this human and his surprising and entirely maddening... sincerity. She fixed the mage with a look. "You, come with me. We finally have to light this damn beacon."

"Right the beacon. Damn, we are probably already too late for the signal!"

"Well, next time, puppy... don't get hit by an ogre."

The mage made quick work with setting the dry wood ablaze, igniting the beacon. Her fellow Warden frowned at her, somewhat amused. "Puppy? Where does this come from?"

Lenya couldn't say and before she was even able to search for a reason, the door banged suddenly open. A swarm of darkspawn poured through the doorway from the lower floors. The tower guard hit the ground with a scream, his throat and chest pierced by arrows. The mage was the next who fell victim to their sudden attack. It all happened too quickly, leaving her no time to react or defend herself. Several arrows hit her in her abdomen and shoulder, the sheer force of it knocking her over.

She hit her head upon the stone and heard Alistair scream, right before passing out.
The crackle of fire burning was the first sound reaching his senses, mixed with the dull roar of thunder and raindrops trickling upon shattered glass. Slowly Alistair opened his eyes and wondered why he was still able to do so. Sprawled out on the floor in a pool of his own blood, he still lay where the darkspawn had overwhelmed him. His gaze remained bleary, unfocused, and ironically it was the sharp tug of pain inside which gave him some clarity.

Why hadn't the darkspawn finished him off? It made no sense for him to be still alive. Breathing was hard, every intake of air burned in his lungs. He spat out a mouthful of blood and coughed painfully right after. Well, it seemed as it wouldn't take long anymore until death would claim him after all. Blinking fast to clear his sight, Alistair heaved up his head to glance toward his fellow Warden. Lenya lay close by, unmoving, as if dead. Several arrows stuck out from within her abdomen and shoulder.

*Oh no.*

Maybe she was still alive. He had to make sure. Alistair grunted out in pain as he rolled himself from his back to his abdomen in a cumbersome motion. The heat of the flames licked at his bloodied skin as he crouched forward to where she lay. Each movement hurt, ached like fire, but he gritted his teeth and fought through the pain it caused. He had to reach her. If nothing else, Alistair could at least ensure that... she would not have to die alone.

Having finally reached her, Alistair looked down at her completely still form and touched her face. Alistair couldn't feel a pulse with his thick metal gloves and lacked the strength to remove them. All he could do was to keep her company until, until-

*Lenya ...*

He realized it then. In the worst possible moment, the word to describe her came to him.

She was... an enigma.

Contradictory in everything, Alistair would have liked to look closer, past her facade of hostility, of hurt. To get to know her better, *longer* than a mere day. But he wouldn't get that now, not even another hour. At least, he wouldn't have to die alone here, nor would she.

It was a bitter solace within the realization of failure, but a solace nonetheless.

*I'm sorry... Duncan. I failed.*

Eyes blurring with unspent tears, Alistair felt his senses growing dull. Not a moment later, he broke down beside her, breathing what seemed to be his last gasp of air.

The battlefield below her was carnage. Littered with corpses clad in a telltale blue and gray, Flemeth knew that searching for survivors there would be a fruitless and dangerous endeavor. The darkspawn feasted in large hordes upon their bodies and whoever was unlucky enough to have survived the battle was dragged off below the ground. No, her presence was required elsewhere. Beating the wings of her dragon form, she steered toward the right area of Ostagar's ruins, toward the Tower Of Ishal. Halting midair in front of its dome, Flemeth spat a controlled amount of fire at the building to crack its roof open. As an old woman, they couldn't expect her to *walk* all her way up to its top, after all.

Amused by her own humor, the witch landed on the edge of the top of the tower, and transformed
back to her human form.

"Ah yes," she clucked her tongue as she approached both Wardens in the middle of the room. "There they are." It was a touching picture to see them lying there together, united in death. Or rather *non-death*, now where she had found them. Just as expected.

Snapping her fingers, Flemeth let a powerful wave of healing magic wash over them to fix the worst of their injuries. It would be a pity should they expire during their flight back to safety, after all.

"Now, children," the witch said, looking down at them. "Let's get you away from this place. It may be lost, but your destinies do not end here."

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

Newly written chapter, you know the drill by now. It was important to me to breathe in more life into the Wardens at Ostagar a final time, to make the emotional punch all the sweeter. (Junan :) and to showcase the Joining from a very introspective/close pov, instead of only rehashing the game scene. I kept the Tower of Ishal quest briefer, and instead focused on the characters (showcasing Lenya's quick grasp of battle and of new situations), and the fallout of it. Ah, sweet sweet angst :D The scenes I have described there are based on this excellent mod, btw.

Kudos and especially comments are most appreciated :)
The Weight Of Living

Chapter Summary

Having lost everything and everyone after Ostagar, Alistair is wrecked with grief. Flemeth has saved them both, but has a hard time to convince Lenya to do the right thing, when the logical thing to do were to run after her clan and forget anything of that ever happened.

Chapter Notes

Whoohoo, I am back, and hopefully so with a regular schedule as well. We will see ;)
This chapter is beta read by my fellow fanfic writer, friend, and favorite owl heffalumps, whom I love. You rock bb <3

Also thx to bohemiantea who helped me out with the two last sentences as I was stuck at how to end the chapter.

The air in the witches' hut was stuffy and smelled of medical herbs, mud and mildew - though Alistair hardly registered any of that. Kneeling next to Lenya's bed, Alistair stared numbly down at her unconscious form. Again and again, his view blurred with unspent tears, stinging within his eyes until they rolled hotly over his cheeks.

This couldn't be real.

Even two days after waking up from what should have been his certain death, it still felt like a nightmare he couldn't wake up from. The battle of Ostagar had been lost. The Wardens were dead. Junan, Benson... Duncan. They were all gone. She - Lenya - and he were all that were left of the Fereldan Wardens now. Alistair covered his mouth with his hand to stifle the sound of the whimper escaping his throat and let his head sink onto the rough straw mattress. For two days now, he had spent every waking moment by her side, needing the comfort of the knowledge of not being alone. Her taint scratched at the back of his head. Its intensity has become less volatile ever since her Joining, though it was far more subdued right now than he would have liked.

Given her multitudinous injuries that had far outweighed his own, it was a miracle that she was still alive. Blinking away new tears, Alistair looked at her sleeping form again. Blood still matted her blond, long hair, like it had the first time he'd seen her. Several bandages covered her pale skin; they were wrapped and secured around her shoulder, arms, abdomen and one leg - the places where the arrows of the darkspawn had hit their mark and nearly killed her.

Alistair took her hand into both of his. Her skin was hot to the touch, far more than seemed normal. Startled, he let her hand drop back down and moved his palm up to touch her forehead, which was equally hot. She was burning up, and her breathing seemed more labored than usual. Oh no. No, no, no. She couldn't die - not after everything that had happened. He would be all alone, the only one left. Panic rose and tore through the fog of grief clouding his mind. He had to get help, even it
meant searching for the sour-faced witch with the permanent scowl etched onto her expression. In this, at least, she was so very similar to his fellow Warden.

His head swam as he hurried to stand up, protesting the hasty motion. Alistair held onto the wood of the bed's simple footboard to stabilize himself and waited for the dizzy spell to pass. As soon as he was able, he rushed toward the door, ignoring his own half-healed wounds and rumpled appearance.

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Outside of the hut, all was quiet - too quiet. Only the soft cawing of a raven was heard now and then, its sound tearing through the Wild's unnatural stillness. The perpetual fog-dimmed daylight was muted further by the thick, dark clouds overhead. It would be raining soon, like it had when - Alistair shook his head, willing the thought away. At least for the moment. He had to get help, had to see that Lenya would get better - or else he would be all alone again.

Like he was right now in the Wilds, since neither of the two witches were anywhere to be seen. Alistair limped past the hut to each of the building's sides, hoping to find, well, any of his unlikely saviors, but to no avail.

Just as he was about to give up and return to the hut, a jet black raven landed behind him with an angry caw. Turning around to face the animal, he took a quick step back as it grew and formed into something more bigger and human-shaped - until the witch stood in front of him. Fully clothed in her odd leather robe, she - Morrigan - scowled at him.

"Ah," she said with a sneer, her posture as aloof as her words. "So you have finally decided to rejoin us, instead of whimpering at the elf's side? Falling on your blade in grief seemed like too much trouble, I take it?"

Alistair's eyes narrowed. For all her apparent beauty, this woman was a cold, cruel snake. Fitting for an apostate who lived in such a bleak environment, he supposed, but he couldn't stand her misplaced callousness, especially not now. He set his jaw as he glared at her. "Is my being upset so hard to understand? Have you never lost someone important to you? … Just what would you do if your mother died?"

Morrigan scoffed curtly. "Before or after I stopped laughing?"

"Already done, fool." She started moving away.

"Wait -" he started, finally remembering the reason why he had come out here in the first place. "Lenya... she - she is - she has -" Maker, he couldn't stop trembling all the sudden.


She was goading him, again. Though the ire caused by her audacity helped him stop shaking and focus on the here and now, and his words."My fellow Warden..." Alistair paused to swallow, his throat too tight. "She has a fever, I think."

Morrigan sighed. "... Mother said this could happen." The witch stalked away, toward one weathered wooden barrel in front of the stone hut, and retrieved the vial placed on top of it. "She left me this brew in case it happened in her absence."
Alistair eyed the strangely colored concoction in her hands with distrust. He had a bad feeling about letting Lenya drink... *that*, yet he did not have much choice in the matter. "Will this... help her?"

"There is not much mother *can't* heal. She has plucked you both from the top of the tower and treated your wounds, has she not?" Morrigan regarded him with scorn. "'Tis the question why, for you do not seem worth the trouble." With that, she opened the wooden door to the hut and slammed it shut in his face. For a moment, he remained rooted on the spot, staring blankly at the moldy wood of the door in front of him.

"Ah, children. So full of life," a deep, resonating voice cackled behind him, halting his hand on the door handle. What was it with these witches and their penchant to appear out of the blue? Creepy, that. "Leave her be, Warden. Following Morrigan inside would be ill-advised now, and undo all my work."

"But why?" he asked, his voice nearly a whisper. A new wave of grief rolled over him from the depths of his being, so intense that he momentarily forgot how to breathe. He shook, and the rapid heartbeat in his ears was all he could hear. A sound which *should* have been impossible after the darkspawn ambush. He should have been dead on top of the tower, like all the others were, down on the battlefield. "Why me?"

Alistair noticed her stepping closer, but did not turn around to the old witch. "Why did you not save the other Wardens?" Tears shot into his eyes, blinding his sight. Blinking them away rapidly, he whirled round to her at last. "Why not... Duncan?"

The witch cocked her head. Her golden eyes, hidden behind black face paint, regarded him for a long moment. "Guilt, bah. Such a pesky thing, isn't? If I didn't know it was the cause for your words just now, I'd think you would rather have died with the rest of your brethren."

*I should have..." B-but I am a nobody. Duncan... -"

"You *are* a Warden," she cut him off, shrugging. The feather pauldrons of her ebony robe rustled from the motion. "And the one I *could* save, along with your fellow Grey Warden. Whoever your Duncan was, he was beyond my reach."

"Duncan is..." Alistair swallowed, frowning at her. "...*was* our leader and -"

"'Tis a moot point, young man. Do not be ungrateful for your life. I have saved it and that of your beloved elf as well." The old witch laughed out. "We cannot have all the Wardens die in the time of a Blight, no?"

"My... beloved... *what*? She is not -" Alistair drove an erratic hand through his rumpled hair. "Why does everyone keep saying this? I barely know her."

"Details, details." She heaved one shoulder to another shrug. "You *will* get to know her in the months to come. So bottle your grief, Warden. Or better yet, turn it into anger. It will help you survive while fighting this Blight."

Alistair blinked. "Fighting the Blight? Me?"

With a shake of her head, she clicked her tongue. "You can't expect me to do *all* the work, now can you?"

"I -" Alistair was still reeling at the implications of her words. Even if he were willing to do his part, he was just one Warden and... - "Lenya! Will she be okay?" He hated how pathetic and whiny
he sounded to his own ears. "If... we are to -" His voice shook. "Maker, I can't do this on my own."

"Hah, you worry too much, young man. We shall discuss this further as soon your fellow Warden has awoken, and I have fixed both of your remaining injuries. Can't have you stumbling half-wounded toward your destined path, after all."

Before he could reply to her weird 'destiny' remark, the door to the hut opened, and Morrigan appeared in its frame. Alistair's eyes widened as his gaze fell upon her half-gloved hands. They were partly tinted crimson. *Blood*. Heedless of him, she threw the older witch a sardonic smile. "Mother. 'Tis so nice of you to honor me with your presence after all. 'Twould have been much nicer had you have appeared before the elf's arrow wound reopened." She stalked over to an open barrel filled with rainwater to wash her hands. "I cleaned and re-bandaged it for now, but, dearest mother, it would be kind of you to not vanish just so while our guests remain."

"Bah, spare me your sarcasm, Morrigan. I have my own preparations to make." The old witch waved her off. "This is why I always told you to pay more attention to healing magic." She laughed out. "Who knows? It may save someone someday. Or yourself. Or... both."

"How entirely unhelpful, Mother. I do begin to wonder if the Wardens are even worth all the effort." Morrigan spun on her heels with a huff. "'Tis a waste of *my* time, at least."

Alistair followed her and stepped into her way. "Lenya... what did you do to her?"

Having no choice but to acknowledge him now, her expression morphed into a scowl. "Have you not been listening? Shall I speak more slowly for your feeble mind?"

Bestowing her with the same kind of glare the witch showed him, Alistair pushed past her and limped into the hut.

"Especially in *his* case, 'tis futile," he heard Morrigan scoff as he closed the door behind him. Leaning his head on the wood, he closed his eyes and released a trembling breath. The silence inside of the hut was broken only by the hum of the taint scratching at the back of his skull. It was the one thing which kept him from sinking too far into his grief. If she -

"Please don't die," he heard himself whisper without meaning to. Reopening his eyes, he looked over to where she lay. Dark red dots blotted the blanket which covered her abdomen and chest. Alistair limped over to her bed and sat down on the ground next to it. Relief flooded him as he noticed her more gradual breathing, though it was short-lived.

"Lenya, I barely even know you." His eyes clouded over with tears again as he looked at her. "And I'm aware you didn't want to be a Warden, b-but you are all I have left now. Please... *please* don't leave me alone. I-I don't want to be alone aga-" The sobs punched through his throat, stopping his words and ripping through his muscles, bones and guts. He pressed his forehead against the mattress and cried, lost to the world.

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*She felt wonderful – free, actually.*

Dots of warm sunlight found their way through even the thickest branches of the trees and danced upon her face. Lenya turned to Tamlen, a wicked grin playing on her features.

"I bet I can outrun you..." The grin bloomed wider on her face.
Tamlen kept walking, the dry, wooden carpet of the forest crackling beneath his feet. "Lenya, we are here to hunt," he answered flatly. To give his words more weight, he pointed to the longbow he was holding.

Lenya feigned a pout. "Ah, always the voice of reason. How very boring."

"No, I'm not, and you know it... but just think about what will happen if we fail again. I'm not in the mood for another hours-long lecture from Favrel or our Keeper about clan responsibilities."

He shot her a wry look.

Lenya grimaced. "Okay, that's a good reason, I admit. They really do talk way too much. It's like listening to water running down a creek after a while, if you ignore the actual words coming out of their mouths."

"I might try that next time, it might make it more tolerable," Tamlen laughed. "Still I have no desire for a repeat. The Keeper is still mad at me for sneaking into her aravel."

She grinned and patted her friend playfully on the back. "Thanks for covering for me, by the way."

"It was my pleasure. Though that means you owe me."

"So let's hunt normally today. No games."

"Normally, huh?" Lenya contemplated the thought for a second before a mischievous smile graced her features. "Yes, alright. And now — " she dashed forward, leaving a puzzled Tamlen behind — "... you have to hunt me, slowpoke."

The sound of crackling dry wood mixed with her boisterous laughter as the Dalish ran away from him.

"Hmm, apparently I have to..." Tamlen's voice distorted into something cold and calculating. The once friendly, light-filled forest shifted into a dark and eerie thicket. The green, leafy trees had withered away, leaving gnarled branches in their wake. She attempted to run, yet her feet refused to move. "... hunt you."

Tamlen appeared suddenly in front of her, his bow drawn - the arrow pointed directly at her. Lenya cried out in surprise, her lips quivering.

"Fear? Nightmare Tamlen tilted his head, bearing his teeth to reveal long fangs. His lips curled into a wicked, menacing grin. "That's so unlike you, Lenya. But I like it."

"N-no, T-tamlen," she stuttered, blinking repeatedly. She wanted to stop him, wanted to defend herself, but she found herself paralyzed.

"And now you'll die, like you should have in the cave. Like I did, when you left me behind to save yourself."

With a mad laugh, he loosened his grip and let the arrow fly.

Lenya cried out as the arrow pierced her flesh – and suddenly, she was awake. She blinked, confused by her surroundings as she found herself sitting upright in someone's bed.

"Ah, your eyes finally open. Mother will be pleased," said a voice next to her.

Blinking away the last vestiges of her nightmare, Lenya recognized the face it belonged to as familiar. It was the witch they had met before... before... It didn't make any sense. "Where am I?"

she asked, her voice rough with disuse.

"In the Wilds," the human replied, shrugging. "Safe. Far away from the battlefield the darkspawn have ravaged. Tis what is important, yes?"
"I..." Lenya’s eyebrows drew together. Looking down at herself, she noticed how her bare torso was bandaged, but the wounds that should have been there were... gone. "I know you," she managed. "Morrigan, right?"

"Oh, so you do remember my name? 'Tis beyond flattering, really," the witch replied with a roll of her golden eyes. "Especially given I tended to your wounds the past two weeks."

"Two weeks?" Lenya gasped. "I was - but how? I remember being on top of that tower and -" I should be dead.

"From which Mother plucked you and your dim-witted friend by turning into a giant bird, yes."

"How? What happened? Help me understand, Morrigan!"

"Let me be brief, then." The witch looked as if she was grasping at the last straws of her patience. Her fingers dug into her leather-clad arms folded over her chest. "The man who should have answered to the signal has fled the field. The darkspawn have won your battle. Those he abandoned were all massacred. Your... friend has veered between denial and grief ever since Mother told him."

"You mean... Alistair?" So he had survived as well. While Lenya was still grappling with what she had been told, this fact seemed like consolation, something to hold on to. However annoying the human was, he didn't deserve to die. It was good that he hadn’t. "Why did your mother save us?"

"You best ask her that herself." Morrigan scoffed. "She rarely tells me her plans." She pointed toward a large chest on the other side of the room. "In there, you will find clothes and armor Mother has prepared for you. You better clean yourself up and get dressed. She wants to speak to you before you set off on your way again." With that, the witch turned to leave.

"Morrigan... wait!" Lenya could see how her back stiffened as she stopped. "Thank you for your help."

The tension left her shoulders as quickly as it had come. The witch turned to look at her, a hint of confusion marring her expression. "I... You are welcome. Though Mother did most of the work. I am no healer."

Nodding numbly, Lenya watched her go. With the door closed, silence returned, accompanied by a bout of panic slowly rising within her chest as Morrigan's words settled in. She had never been fond of the Wardens, nor wanted to belong to their shitty little club in the first place, but every one of them being dead? That was far beyond anything Lenya could have imagined happening.

***

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Her hands shook and the washcloth fell back into the bucket. She had to get out of here and then... find her clan. They must have moved further north by now, away from Ferelden. Which seemed to be the most sensible action, given how the darkspawn horde roamed free and unstopped after the disaster that had been Ostagar. Inhaling deeply to stabilize herself, Lenya tried to find the silver lining in this utter mess.

Well, for one, she was alive, despite the impossibility of it. Her sickness was... gone, replaced by, ugh, more taint, but gone nonetheless. The Wardens were dead and so were everyone who knew
she was a Warden herself. She could just... *leave*. Nod, smile, express gratitude to *Asha'bellanar* for saving her life, and then leave. She could do this.

On the downside, she probably had to kill the Warden shem, or at least knock him over the head, since he had survived with her. Huh, suddenly the fact wasn't *that* comforting anymore.

Breathing out, Lenya rushed to slip into the provided clothing and her old boots - only to stop in her tracks at the sight of the armor parts lain out for her. Either *Asha'belannar* had a particular sense of humor or a penchant to collect shiny things. Given the tale of her turning into a giant bird, the latter seemed more feasible. For Lenya's plan to escape to her clan, which required hiding her unwillingly acquired new identity, said armor parts were quite a hindrance. Or rather the griffon emblazoned on the chestpiece and the telltale blue-grey color of it was.

Creators, couldn't the witch have waved her hands and repaired her old armor, instead of collecting bits from... yes, where exactly? Lenya let the chestpiece fall back on the ground as it dawned on her. Oh no, *no*. This was just gross. At least she had the decency to clean them after...- Lenya grimaced and decided to forgo the armor in favor of grabbing her weapon belt. Pleased to find her weapons, complete and intact, sheathed within, she put it on and walked to the door.

***

Stepping out of it, Lenya suddenly remembered why she'd called this shemlen a puppy before. He rushed toward her at an excitable speed that rivaled an eager baby animal. "Oh, you are alive. Thank the Maker."

Lenya backed away from his exuberant attempt to hug her until her back hit the rough stone of the hut behind her. "Yes. But you won't be for long anymore, if you continue this, shem."

Her words did the trick, seeming to remind him that they were loose acquaintances instead of best friends. And even 'acquaintance' was a fairly generous description of their relationship. It was more 'I fought at his side once'. He stepped back, his arms falling to his side. Unlike herself, he was all armored up in *Asha'belannar's* found parts. Maybe it was his way to honor his fallen comrades . Lenya wasn't here to judge, but to... *escape*. "Sorry," he said, his tone so dejected it felt like a kick in her guts. "But.. they are dead. The Grey Wardens, Duncan, even the King. They are all dead! And without Morrigan's mother, we would be dead on top of that tower, too."

"Do not speak of me as if I am not present, lad," the old witch said from behind them.

"I didn't mean... but what do I should call you? I never got your name."

"Names are pretty, but useless." She waved him off. "You can call me Flemeth, if you must. For I doubt you can even pronounce the name your Dalish friend gave me." The witch feigned a thinking pose. "Or was it *my* Dalish friends who did that? Hah, I can never remember."

Flemeth directed her attention toward the Dalish and her distinctive lack of armor. "I see you have refused my gift? Is this your way to thank me for my generous help?"

"I simply prefer my armor not be ripped away from dead bodies, *Asha'belannar*!"

"Pah, *they* don't need it any longer." The old witch chuckled. "And it would do you good to be less choosy in your situation. Especially when dealing with the Blight in the months to come."

Lenya stared at her. "With the... what now? No!"
"Huuuh," Flemeth drawled the word and clicked her tongue. "Curious. Since when is it no longer the Grey Wardens' duty to unite the lands against the Blight, I wonder?"

"Since they all died at Ostagar!" Lenya could feel the raw power thrum underneath Flemeth's deceivingly frail appearance, but closed in on her nonetheless. "Have you not being paying attention? Besides..." She pointed at the shemlen next to her. "... he is the real Grey Warden here, not I!"

"All the Grey Wardens in Ferelden are gone, except for us. I have lost everyone!" Creators, his eyes. She had to look away, unable to stand the sadness within. "For the love of the Maker..." His voice cracked as a sob crept up his throat. "Don't back out on me now!"

"Ugh, is he crying again?" Lenya turned her head to see Morrigan scowling at the human. "‘Twas foolish of me to ever think the Grey Wardens were great warriors. Obviously those legends are nothing but fairy tales." Not caring to wait for a retort or reply from him, she continued to stack up wood in a neat pile for a fire.

"Look..." She glanced back at her fellow Warden and immediately regretted it. He still looked like a puppy someone had kicked too many times. "Emma ir abelas, what happened is shitty. Really shitty." She hardened her gaze, trying not to let herself to get influenced by the raw hurt in his eyes. "But what do you expect me to do, huh? I had been a Warden for a day when this mess happened. It nearly cost my life. Again. I never wanted to have any part in it to begin with. So excuse me if I refuse to nod and smile to whatever idiotic, suicidal things you have cooked up, shem. Go back home to your family and let me do the same."

"I can't!" The stifled sobs wracked silently against his chest. "They are all dead!"

Well, shit. So much for reasoning with the oversized human puppy. Lenya caught herself searching for a hand-sized rock on the ground to smack over his head. She could still make a run for it, although he'd already managed to make her feel bad about this idea. Damn this human!

"If your trouble lies within how to approach this huge task ahead of you," Flemeth raised her voice again after being a silent listener for a while. "I can assure you, you aren't on your own in uniting Ferelden and battling the Blight." She turned toward Alistair. "You remember the documents I kept safe for you, yes?"

He exhaled roughly and his expression lightened up a bit. "Yes, of course. The treaties. We can demand help from the elves, the mages, dwarves and other places. They are obligated to help us during a Blight."

"Oh, now that sounds more like having an army than being on your own." Asha'belannar smiled knowingly at them both. "Much better, yes?"

"Well yes," Lenya agreed, snorting. "Except I don't have these papers."

"Um, I have," the Warden shem said. "I forgot to give them back to Dun-" He cleared his throat to keep the tears at bay. "... well, I have them."

"How... nice.\" She glared at him for ruining her chance to still get out of this. "Maybe you should go and share them with the other Wardens then?"

"Searching for the other Wardens would mean leaving Ferelden behind, and I can't do that. Besides, Cailan has already contacted them. They'll come if they can, but I expect Loghain has already taken steps to stop them. We must assume they won't arrive in time." He looked at her. "It
is really up to us."

"Us?" Lenya bristled, making herself stand on the tips of her toes, and poked his armored chest. "There is no ‘us’, shem! There is only an ‘I told you so’ in regard to that Loghain shemlen. There is me finding my clan and forgetting all of this ever happened."

"Oh, right, very mature, Lenya!" The human closed in on her until he towered over her with his sheer mass and height. "Run away until all your problems are no more, because that will work out so well for you." With a scoff, he raised his voice further. "Until the archdemon appears and swallows everything you ever knew and loved. If you even care."

"Enough!" Flemeth's sudden outburst stopped them both in their tracks, and, well, her from launching herself at her fellow Warden. Still tense, her hands balled into fists, she continued to glare at him. "If you both don't stop bickering, I will drown you in this very swamp." Lenya felt the air crackle with powerful energy around her, causing her hair stand on end. "And you, elf." She winced as Asha'belannar addressed her, shifting her gaze from Alistair to the witch. "Do you truly believe you could outrun this Blight? That your clan can? For a time, perhaps, yes, but this Blight won't stop at Ferelden's borders. What will you do then? Where will you run, girl?"

Her first impulse was to reply in defiance, but Lenya found her mouth moving without words leaving it. Bare under her piercing stare, she had no answer. She looked down, feeling herself faltering and loathing this weakness. "I don't want to be dragged into this!" she snapped at first, but her voice cracked like her ire, altered into quiet frustration and guilt. "You should have simply left me on top of that tower!" Next to her, Lenya heard the damn puppy suck in a breath and felt him backing away.

"Perhaps," the old witch agreed. "Twould have been easier for you, girl. Simply perishing without leaving your mark on this world. Without the weight of living and surviving where others died in your stead. But you also know, girl, that easy was never an option for you, especially after -"

"H-how?" she cut into her words. The witch couldn't possibly know that. Stepping closer, she stared into her wrinkled face, into those unfathomable golden eyes behind coal face paint. "Just who... are you?"

Flemeth cackled, seemingly amused by the question. "Oh, you gave me a name, remember? Asha'belannar - the woman of many years. ‘Tis fitting, I think." Her eyes lit up with mirth. "As such, I had enough time to worry about the fate of this world, even if it has forsaken me. So I nudge and prod at it, when needed. You have profited from it as well, have you not?" Again a cryptic non-answer, though Lenya didn't expect she would get a honest one out of the witch anyway.

"Is that why you saved us?"

"Ah, young man," she chided him, "I already told you that we can't have all the Grey Wardens dying. Someone has to deal with the real threat behind it all while the fools bicker over politics and power."

"The archdemon..." the puppy said, understanding dawning on him.

"Ugh." She made a face. "I will regret asking... but what exactly is this archdemon?"

"Oh my," Flemeth laughed. "What do they teach you in the Wardens these days?"

Lenya glared up at her. "I was a Warden exactly for a day when the battle happened. And I would have never become one if I had been given a choice."
"Ah yes, choice is a wonderful thing, isn't it? Sadly as rare as to find two of the same stockings."
The humor vanished from her expression. "Let me enlighten you then, girl. An archdemon is one of the old Tevinter gods, once sent by the Maker to slumber deep beneath the surface. They only resurface during a Blight. When one does resurface, the old god gets tainted by the darkspawn, making it an archdemon. It unites the horde, creating an army of death and destruction. History tells us that this creature is exceptionally powerful and immortal... and only fools ignore history."

"And to end the Blight we must defeat this archdemon. Only a Grey Warden can do it," Alistair added, frowning. "Not that I like the idea, exactly..."

Creators, she had to ask. To hide her discomfort and the newly reawakened impulse to flee, Lenya escaped into sarcasm. "Thank you. I feel much better with that knowledge under my belt."

"I am nothing if not helpful," Asha’belannar cackled with a smugness Lenya found intolerable. "Especially if it helps you to understand why running away would only postpone the inevitable."

"So I should fight an immortal god instead?" This was halla shit, absolute stinking halla shit.

"Think step by step, girl," the witch chided. "The treaties are there for a reason. Find allies through them first, build an army and then fight your immortal god. In doing so, you can protect your clan."

Lenya glowered at her, despising the lack of choice she was once again being given. But even more she hated the truth in Flemeth’s words. Sure, she could still run away, search for her clan and play the oblivious fool once she’d found them, live in ignorant bliss once more. For a time, at least. The crux of knowledge was always that, once it had been acquired, ignorance would no longer work as a shield against the uncomfortable truth. No matter from which angle she looked at it, the old witch was right. Running away would only postpone the inevitable and, in the end, would certainly come back and bite her in the ass. Maybe it would even cost not just Taml-...

"Fine, let’s do this!" Lenya blurted so suddenly that both of their heads turned to her. “ Ugh,” she added as they stared at her in unison.

“What?” the puppy said, while Asha’bellanar next to him only looked disgustingly smug.

She loathed them with every fiber of her being right now. Lenya crossed her arms in defiance and lifted her chin up. “I won’t repeat myself.”

“Nor do you need to, girl,” Flemeth said, all too pleased. “There have been too many words already; now is the time to act.” Her golden gaze flitted over to Morrigan, who busied herself in stirring a large cooking pot placed on the now lit and crackling fireplace. “And, as my appreciation for the conclusion reached, let me give you one last thing to ease your burdens on your long way.” She laughed. “I believe you will find it - her - quite useful.”

Lenya was the first to grasp the meaning of her words. “You mean -”

“Yes,” the witch said with a nod, smirking at her. “So you better go back inside and collect the remaining gear, as you will leave immediately. With her as your guide and loudmouthed companion to aid you in your task. I am certain you both will get along just fine, hah.”

“Er, well…” her fellow Warden started to object, but was interrupted by Flemeth addressing her daughter. “Morrigan, would you be so kind as to come over here?”

"Kind, mother?” she scoffed in reply as she walked over. “ I did not realize we offered such. Whyever would I do so now?”
"Because you will be leaving with the Grey Wardens."

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

Quite a few changes here. I put way more emphasis on Alistair's grief than in the first version. Also there are far more interactions with Flemeth overall, because I love to write her and it made sense for her to speak up. Lenya was difficult to handle in this chapter because she stayed very uncooperative to the fight the blight idea till the very end. It was planned differently, but ofc that girl does what she wants, heh. Hence why I had to cut off the chapter rather abruptly.

The only part I have taken over from the old version is the dream sequence with Tamlen, since it mirrored her survivor guilt with Alistair's own quite nicely.

Kudos and especially Comments are much appreciated.
Chapter Notes

First of all, sorry for the quite long phase of disappearing. I struggled more than anticipated with this chapter, so it took me very long to complete it. On top of that, winter is flu time, thus my beta got sick and I had to wait for her to leave the land of the death again, before she could return to my wordy salad. Glad you are feeling better, effe <3

Thanks so much to heffalumps for the beta read *throws vitamins at you*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alone, I fight these animals.
Alone, until I get home.

- Of Monster And Men, Six Weeks

She hated it - them.

More than their unwanted company, however, Morrigan hated her mother right now. For casting her out with the Wardens, without as much as asking her - When she wasn't even ready for it. She knew why, the sense and purpose behind it, yet this knowledge didn't make her resent the suddenness of it any less. Fingers curled tightly around her rough wooden staff, she glared at the person walking next to her.

The blonde elf, now outfitted in the Warden rogue armor her mother had collected for her, seethed in quiet rage as she stomped through the squelching mud far more loudly than needed. The fool, more boy than man, had his eyes firmly cast down on his boots and took the rear of their unlikely group. In his grief, he looked ready to throw himself at the next darkspawn horde they ran into. Alas, it was Morrigan's task to lead them around all the darkspawn hordes lingering in the depths of the Wilds, or else she would have gladly cheered him on as he did so. The past weeks around his constant whining over his fallen comrades had been already trying enough. She didn't relish the idea of spending more time in his company, at least not without setting him on fire.

The Dalish was... distant, hung up in her own petty problems, though she seemed by far more tolerable. It did little to lessen Morrigan's resentment of being forced into this role, however. While she yearned to see the world beyond the Wild's borders, it should have been on her terms and not those of her mother or the Wardens.

Do what you must, Morrigan.

A huff escaped her lips upon the remembrance of her mother's words, the frustration now visible in the tenseness of her shoulders. Green eyes flitted over to her for a brief moment. The elf's look was as much appraisal as it was an expression of annoyance for disturbing the stillness established between them. Morrigan held her stare long enough to notice the sharpness within her eyes, an intelligence the other Warden appeared to lack. She'd noticed it before, in the Wilds, upon meeting
her for the first time. Now, however, this observation seemed like a possibility that maybe, maybe they weren't all as doomed as she had initially thought.

Looking away, the witch glanced up to the sky and sighed. Under the ever-present cloak of fog and thick dark clouds, the prior daylight had dwindled to a barely perceptible lightening. The way out of the Wilds was still long, and the night was approaching faster than she had calculated. The lack of natural light was another telltale sign of a growing Blight - much as the absence of wildlife was. It had probably fled further north to escape its effect.

"We shall make camp soon," she announced, slowing her steps. "Lest we stumble into a darkspawn horde in the darkness."

Behind her, the fool scoffed as if in disagreement. He immediately fell back into brooding silence, sparing Morrigan the energy to comment.

The elf bestowed her with an roll of her eyes. "Here, on the open field, amidst the swamp?" she asked, the same anger shown in her posture as in her voice.

After hours spent in their unwilling company, Morrigan was all too willing to rise to this obvious bait. She narrowed her eyes at Mahariel. "Did I say we would make camp right now, in this instant? Do not take me for a fool, elf. I know this area well enough. We should pass a glade soon, where we can make camp for the night."

"Whatever..." she muttered and stomped away with the indignation of a twelve-year-old girl. This was going to be a long night… and even a longer journey.

Standing over the corpse of a hurlock she'd killed with frightening ease only moments ago, Lenya was still hacking and slashing at it with her blades. Whenever the sharp metal of her weapon hit its rotten flesh, the motion made a wet, squelching sound. Dark blood sprayed in small spouts from it on and around her.

Lenya barely noticed.

She was too caught in the rhythm of hatred, dancing to its alluring tune. Like fire it burned on and beneath her skin, a seething rage taken out on the darkspawn corpse to mask her own failure. Failure to say no, failure to turn away and run. Failure to save him ... when it mattered. Her world narrowed down on its lifeless body, the grimace of a rotten face she hated so much. Again and again, she stabbed and sliced, unable to stop.

They had taken him away from her. They were the reason why she now was here, against her will, fighting a futile, stupid battle. The darkspawn were the source of her misery, and she had to make them go away. She had to - a yelp tore through the ringing of her ears, sounding alien, unlike her voice.

Something nudged her leg and whined. Through the haze of rage, Lenya heard her name being called. Her breathing ragged and too loud, she forced herself to look away from the bloodied pulp she had turned the hurlock into and saw... a dog? The animal was still pawing at her as if begging her to stop. She let the blades clatter to the ground and blinked rapidly to regain her senses. Lenya recognized the voice calling her name as belonging to her fellow Warden.
"Lenya!" he called her again. It must have been the first time in days that he spoke up.

She turned to him and noticed his bewildered stare, the crease of his eyebrows. "A-are you okay?"

"Yes, just fine," Lenya hissed, not even attempting to hide the rawness within her tone. "Everything is great. Couldn't be better, really."

His frown deepened, and she hated how he'd seen more than he should have. How she had given away far more than she had wanted to. The human held her gaze a moment longer than needed before backing away. "It’s dead. Let it go," he simply said, and the hound next to her woofed as if in agreement. Wait... what hound? Lenya glanced toward the animal and recognized it as the mabari she'd helped in Ostagar.

"Ugh." Behind her, Morrigan let out a disgusted noise and pointed at the dog. "Why is it here? We already have one mangy beast-"

"Hey, this is really unneeded," Alistair cut into her words and turned the insult against him back at her. "You should be nicer to yourself, you know?" The satisfied smirk upon having silenced the witch vanished from his expression as quickly as it came. "Hey isn't that the dog you helped in Osta-" A sob swallowed his half-word and his face scrunched in the effort to hold in the others wanting to break free.

"Please, don't cry again," Lenya rushed to say, sounding harsher than intended.

His features hardened. "You're right. I should be angry instead. Loghain..." His hands balled into fists. "He is the one to blame."

On that they could agree, at least. Everything else had to wait until they were able to leave this forsaken patch of land out in the middle of nowhere. And possibly even longer. Lenya nodded. "Yes. That shem-alas is to blame, indeed."

"Does that mean the dog is going to stay?" Morrigan asked, sounding all but pleased at the prospect. The mabari, still bloodied from the darkspawn it tore into pieces not long ago, let his tongue loll out of his mouth and bestowed the witch with a bark of agreement. The witch rolled her eyes. "Great. Now we have a dog and Alistair is still the dumbest in our party."

"Hey, I was educated by the Chantry. I studied history," he objected. "They don't make stupid templars!"

"A templar? You ?" Morrigan sneered, looking him up and down. "Oh my, this explains so much, believe me."

"Anyway," he turned away from the witch and back to her. "I think he was out there looking for you, Lenya." He forced a smile as he looked at the dog. "He's... chosen you. Mabari are like that. They call it imprinting."

Fixing her gaze on the hound, she remembered the kennel master talking about mabari. And how imprinting differed from owning an animal, which would conflict with her belief of Vir Tanadhal. After contemplating the options for a moment, it seemed an all around a good idea to take him with them. Especially since there would be enough enemies into which the dog could sink his sharp teeth, on their way to ... what exactly? 'Fighting the Blight' was such an idiotic, unachievable goal that Lenya didn't even dare to think about it. Staying alive and reaching this shemlen village Morrigan spoke of seemed a far more sensible and feasible task, however. So she decided to focus on that, for now.
"Fine, the dog can come," Lenya agreed and reclaimed her weapons from the ground. Right after, she moved to leave. The fading daylight didn't offer much more time to reach this achievable goal in the form of the village. Maybe they should stop halfway and make camp instead.

Unlike the mabari and Morrigan, her fellow Warden didn't move from his spot. "You don't want to give him a name first?"

"A name?" Lenya stopped to turn around to him. "Why? He is a dog."

"Yes, obviously. That doesn't mean he doesn't deserve his own name."

Beside her, the mabari nudged her leg as if urging her to decide. "Okay, fine." She crossed her arms. "Name him, then."

"What? No, no. Bad idea. And besides, he is your dog, Lenya."

"No. I don't own him. He chose to follow me. Big difference." The dog slanted his head with a low woof.

"You are doing that now?" Morrigan let out an annoyed sigh. "Bickering about a mangy beast amidst the darkspawn corpses, out on an open field?" She threw her free hand up and stalked away. "Unbelievable."

"He is not mangy," the puppy said to his smaller canine version. "Okay, if you really insist on not naming him yourself..." Grinning slightly, he feigned a thinking pose. "How about... Barkspawn then?"

Lenya flinched. Creators, this was even worse than his abysmal jokes in Ostagar. Glaring up at him, she almost wished he would revert back to brooding silence. "No. Absolutely not. This name is stupid and... ugh."

"Oh?" He arched an eyebrow, challenging her. "You have a better one, then?"

"Yes. Literally anything is a better name than Barkspawn. Like..." Stopping, she wrecked her brain for elvhen words."... Asha... Amae." No, these are no good. Too feminine in meaning."... Revas." Yes, that was it. At least the dog could be what had been taken from her since she set foot in that creator-damned cave. Free. Free to choose. Free to follow. Unlike herself. "Let's call him Revas... which means freedom in my mother tongue." The mabari barked happily, acknowledging his new name.

"A nice thought, that." The shem's smile was genuine before turning into something more smug. "See? That wasn't so hard, right?" With that, he started to walk away, leaving her standing there alone with the realization that she had been goaded into doing exactly what he wanted her to do.

Hurrying her steps to not fall behind too much, Lenya found herself disagreeing with what Morrigan said earlier. Her fellow Warden was annoying, yes - downright infuriating, even. But not dumb.

Together alone.
Those were the words that came into her mind when Lenya looked at her unlikely companions. Each of them stayed in their own corner of the clearing they had settled down in for the night. Old, gnarled trees towered overhead, their twisted branches giving a false sense of protection and familiarity. The woods close to the road were small, nothing like the Brecilian Forest. And yet, Lenya felt more safe camping here than in any open field, especially after Morrigan had set up runes of protections around the glade's perimeter. They would be safe from darkspawn for the night, which seemed only a small solace given... everything else. After cleaning and sharpening his sword, her fellow Warden had reverted back to his usual brooding routine. Hunched over with his back leaned at a tree, he sat silently in the adjutant corner and stared at the yellow and brown leaves building the woods' natural tapestry.

After the rain of the past day, the soil was still damp and bore a rich earthy smell she knew too well. Again, the echo of a home left behind clawed at Lenya, reminding her of all that she'd lost. In that, she and the human weren't so different, after all. Biting her lip, she glanced away from him, doubting her idea to make camp here for the first time.

Morrigan appeared unperturbed by the emotional turmoil around her, her own small camp as distant from both the Wardens as she was herself. Only the occasional mutter or curse escaped her lips as she busied herself in building her own, secluded campfire. Her ire was directed at the predictably wet pieces of wood that wouldn't comply with her magic and stay lit long enough.

"You need to create embers first. Use different layers of wood stacked on each other," Lenya spoke up and felt the witches' annoyance now directed at her. "It is the groundwork of every fire in wet weather conditions, if you want it to last. Also, it is better if you -"

"I know how to make a fire, elf!" she snapped, cutting her off.

"Apparently not," the Warden shem snorted from his distant corner.

"Well, maybe I should set you on fire, then," Morrigan shot back. "The emptiness in your head should leave the flames enough room to grow."

"You see that bush there behind you?" The puppy pointed behind the witch, his tone harsh. "Could you crawl into it and die? That would be great, thanks."

Ignoring their bickering, Lenya snatched the piece of hardwood out of the witches' hand. "You know what your problem is, Morrigan?"

"This idiot, clearly."

"No." Ushering Revas, who had laid himself down in the middle of the clearing, away, she started to stack up the wood there. The branches the human had collected were suitable for the most part, but her method was lacking. "You tried to stack the wood in a tapered way, so that the fire doesn't get enough oxygen from both above and below." Unlike Morrigan, she built a square platform, using the thick oak hardwood as a base. That would keep the rest of the branches off the ground and create smoldering embers later - those would last to give them heat for the whole night. "The trick is to ensure the fire has enough room to breathe, to establish an airflow until it burns hot enough on its own." Lenya piled the rest of the branches onto each other, each layer facing the other way than the previous one. She finished her square fire perimeter with kindling of birch bark and pine cones. "There, done. Try and set ablaze the upper layer, then let the fire do the rest."

The witch frowned at her, but flicked her hand to send a lick of flame into the fireplace. The natural fuel source burned as predicted, thanks to the resinous oil the pine cones and bark contained. "Great, now we don't have to freeze to death overnight. Still, keep an eye on it, and kindle the
flames if needed."

Morrigan's frown deepened in spite of their success with the fire. "Twas not supposed to be placed in the middle of camp."

"Aww, too bad I don't give a shit. For three people -" Revas grumbled as if peeved that he was being left out."... and a dog," she quickly added, "... one single firepit should suffice." Lenya felt her glare upon herself once more. "Feel free to build your own the next time we camp in a larger area. Not tonight, though, unless you want to burn down everything around us."

The witch turned away with a scoff, leaving her alone in the company of her dog and her growling stomach. *Ugh.* "Say, Revas..." The mabari slanted his head with a whine and looked up at her. "... can you hunt?" He barked once, which Lenya took to mean 'yes'. "Good, because our meager supplies have dwindled to nothing by now. And I could really use some help to hunt some hare, maybe even a deer." She sighed. "If there are any to be found in these parts, that is."

"Now?" The puppy looked up to her and gestured further into the forest. It was clouded in darkness, but the moon stood high in the sky. "It's already dark and-

"Don't worry, shem," Lenya replied and struggled to suppress her scoff. He didn't even know that elves possessed nocturnal sight? Typical. "As long there is any source of light above or around me, I will be able to see well enough."

"Right..." He looked down and, for a split second, the sparse natural light reflected within his eyes in the same way as it always did in hers. Lenya shook her head. No, impossible. That was the flickering light of the fire playing tricks, surely. "Just... I don't know. Take care."

Lenya already had a barbed comment on her lips, but something in his voice made her swallow it down again. His hesitancy to let her go seemed the be about more than just his concern about her getting lost in the underbrush. One glance toward the other corner of the clearing, where Morrigan pouted with the indignation of a child, told her the reason for it. Unseen by her fellow Warden, she rolled her eyes. This felt more and more like herding a bunch of halla fawn than a ragtag team set out with the impossible and *idiotic* mission of saving Ferelden.

"Try not to kill each other while I am gone," she muttered, wondering why she should even care. After all, with them gone, she could reclaim her freedom and run after - yeah, no. That wasn't going to work either, given what Flemeth told her. *Ugh.* So, she settled for something... smaller. "Hey, but no trouble if you do, because then there will be more food for me."

The small deer's carcass slung onto her back weighed her down, making each step sink further into the soft, wet soil. Her cheeks were still heated from the sprint, reddened from the hunt for her quarry until Revas caught it by flanking it from the other side. It was skinny, scraggly animal, hardly enough to feed the three of them, let alone a hungry mabari. Thankfully, Andruil had been merciful and let them stumble over a rabbit hole close to the slain deer. Lenya glanced down at her dog, who proudly carried a pair of hare in his muzzle. She would let him keep one of them, at least. Usually, she preferred the methodical hunt over simply hoping for Andruil to bless her with enough luck to score her game. But with the encroaching night and tiredness, her hunger and the lack of suitable gear and traps, it was all she had tonight. For once, it had been enough, though Lenya made a mental note to build some traps for the next hunt and to buy a bow in the shemlen village.
they would hopefully reach tomorrow.

Taking deep breaths to calm her quickened breathing, she could smell the rusty tang of the blood that dripped from the deer's cut throat. It had been a quick, merciful death for an animal that had been left behind by its herd, alone and weak. Lenya would make sure to thank Andruil for this gift and to pray for the safety of her herd, the clan who had left her behind. She swallowed, blinking faster as the approaching light of the campfire threatened to blur.

Lenya let the carcass fall onto the ground with a loud thunk and motioned for Revas to let go of his game as well. Back at camp, underneath a clear moon and the gnarled, twisted branches of the oaks surrounding the glade, she instantly noticed two things. One, her fellow Warden was gone. Two, Morrigan sat with her back turned to her, cursing underneath her breath. Her hunched form exuded an animosity that was like acid - burning, slicing, potent. She could make out several of her words, "simpering fool", "irresponsible" and "good riddance" among them.

Against her better judgment, Lenya approached the witch. She sat close enough to the campfire to steal some of its warmth, but remained standoffish enough to ward off any company. "Morrigan?"

She whirled around with suddenly, as if preparing to strike the Dalish down. Her golden eyes narrowed at the sight of her. "Oh, 'tis so nice of you to return, at least."

"He ran off," she huffed, her gaze turning into a scowl. "'Tis for the better, as I don't have to endure his whining and self-pitying any longer."

She snorted, pointing at the flames that burned high and bright."Well, at least you tended to the fire." The humor vanished from her face as a quiet sound reached her ears, causing them to twitch briefly. At first she thought she had misheard it, but it repeated soon after, leaving no doubt. It was small sobbing sound, coming from the depth of the woods. It explained why the shem was gone. He was crying.

"Ugh, are you even listening?" Lenya’s attention snapped back to Morrigan, whose scowl had deepened. "That simpering fool should finally get over himself, there is more at stake than -"

"You... told him that, right?" She had only known the witch for a couple of days now, yet long enough to be aware that tact and empathy weren't exactly her strong suit. Not that she herself fared any better in these traits, but that came from a place of indifference, not cruelty.

Morrigan only scoffed. "So you are on his side now?"

"Creators, how old are you? Five? I am on nobody's side."

"Oh?" Morrigan arched her perfectly curved eyebrow. "How are you not taking his side? Since you obviously permit yourself to coddle the idiot and his antics."

"Obviously, I'm just trying to survive long enough to reach this shitty little shemlen village you talked about. Obviously that is a lot harder to do if you are both constantly at each other's throats."

Lenya fell silent for a spell and listened for a sign of life from her fellow Warden. Quiet, short and
ragged, the sobs reached her hearing again, as if ripped out of his chest. For some reason the sound made her angry. "Was that comment really needed, Morrigan? Does it make you feel better having said that to him?" Lenya threw her hands up, the frustration that had been building for days finally tumbling from her lips. "Creators, I get it, he is super annoying, and gods do I hate being stuck with a human, of all people, on this insanity of a quest. It is all so stupid, and I hate it, but there is no reason to be needlessly cruel."

"'Tis curious how you said 'a human', elf. What am I to you, then?" A small smirk stole itself into her pale face. "A bog monster spawned from a log?"

"You are different," Lenya admitted and regretted it right after.

"Ah, am I now?" Her eyebrow shot up again, amused. "How so?"

"Ugh." Of course the witch would try to rile her up, in the same way she had succeeded with the puppy before. And Lenya hated that it had worked. She might as well get it over with and tell her what she wanted to hear. "You were raised in the Wilds by a woman my people revere and lived there, away from other humans. So yeah, you do not have much in common with the other shemlen."

"My, observant, are you?" Underneath apparent humor, her tone was all biting sarcasm. "It seems you have me all figured out." Morrigan paused, seeming to deliberate upon her prior words. "Survival is your goal?" she asked, sounding actually curious now.

"Yes, well, I can hardly fight darkspawn, or the Blight, or whatever it is we do here, when I'm dead, right? That is why your mother saved us, after all."

"Yes," the witch said, glancing away, into the campfire. "'T'would seem so."

"Good," Lenya nodded, surprised to see her being nearly quiet, even thoughtful. "And survival is indeed a far more tangible a goal to me than... everything else."

Morrigan looked back at her. "'Tis a pragmatic view. I can respect that."

"I owe it to them to at least... try."

"To whom?" the witch asked, making her aware that she'd said it out loud.

Her throat tightened, rendering her speechless for a long moment. Lenya could still hear him crying, the sounds more subdued now. Maybe he stifled them in a futile attempt to stop the tears, the grief wrecking him. "My clan," she said in a broken whisper, and only now fully understood why he mourned. She blinked faster, almost frantically, to keep her own tears at bay as she stared out into the night. "My home."

He had lost his, too.

Something cold nudged her hand, and a faint whimper reached her ears. Lenya looked down to see Revas sitting next to her and burrowed her hand into his coarse fur. The warmth underneath her fingertips grounded her again, even if she hadn't noticed when the Mabari had appeared at her side. Revas huffed softly and licked her hand when it came close to his snout.

Turning to him, she crouched down to hug the dog. "Thank you. I'm happy you have found me."

He replied in a way that was almost more person than animal and lay his head upon her shoulder with a quiet whine. The dog smelled horrible, of wet fur and blood and mud, but in this moment, Lenya didn't mind. Letting go, she looked at the mabari with a smile that felt less forced now, if
only a bit. "Revas... can you do me a favor?"

He barked, eager to comply.

He should return, he knew that.

Sitting at the fringe of camp and crying would change nothing about the fact that they were all gone. Forever. Alistair was also aware of that, and really, really wished he wasn't. Pretending everything was fine and using humor as a shield to hide his emotions behind was easier than facing the facts.

He was alone. Again. Everyone he'd known and liked was dead, and he hadn't even been able to die with them. Sitting with his back against a tree, Alistair bit his knuckles to stop the sob from breaking free. Tears welled in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. Would it ever get better? Would it ever hurt less? Maker, why? Why was he, of all people, still alive when Benson, Junan and Duncan d-

Something soft and wet met his other hand, resting in his lap. Alistair stared at the shadowed figure that had appeared next to him, blinking rapidly."Hey..." he managed, his voice trembling and small. The dog let out a whine and nudged his unoccupied hand again. "Why are you here?" The mabari only huffed as if offended by the question and inched closer to him. Revas, Alistair remembered, Lenya had named him. "Shouldn't you be with Lenya?" he asked and didn't even know why he was talking to the hound. "Maker knows, she already appreciates your company far more than mine." Alistair gasped, a sound somewhere between a self-deprecating laugh and a sob. "Not that I blame her, mind you. I'm a complete stranger to her and... a human." Plopping down next to him, the dog nudged his arm aside and lay his massive head in Alistair's lap. It was a heavy weight on his legs, but also warm and... calming somehow. It reminded him of his childhood and the nights spent in the barn, huddled up in between mabari. Hesitantly, Alistair began to pet the mabari and swallowed thickly as he stared out into the night. "No wonder she hates me.

Revas woofed quietly, as if trying to argue that point, but forgot about it as soon Alistair scratched a particular spot behind his ears. His hind leg twitched in time with the scratches and the dog tilted his head just so to give Alistair better access. It looked comical to see such a large warhound behave like a tiny puppy, though he was too caught up in his grief to actually able to laugh at it. He thought about the many times when he had wished Lenya was someone else and felt ashamed. Since it would have meant her death instead of another Warden, and that wasn't wholly fair either. After all, Lenya did not choose to be saved, nor to become a Warden in the first place. She was here by pure happenstance, same as him. And still...

"No, it is okay," he sighed into the night and let his hand fall back at his side. Revas huffed in disappointment. "It would have been better if I had been the one to die, instead of- of-" New tears halted his thought, and his throat became too constricted to speak any further. Alistair felt the dog's tongue lapping at his hand, and his wet nose butted his arm. He started to pet him again, if only to ground himself in the repeated motion, the warmth underneath his fingertips. "What am I doing here? I am in way over my head, and there is no one I can turn to." Duncan would have known what to do, but... he was gone and would never... Silent sob's wrecked through his body, and he had to bite his fist to stifle its crescendo.

"Look at me," he sniffled through his tears after another moment had passed. "I am talking to a
dog." Revas let out an offended growl as he glanced up at the human. Wiping hastily at his tears, Alistair started to pet the dog's head again. "Sorry. I know you understand me. It is just... I don't know," he finished lamely, feeling incapable of voicing the grief overwhelming him in waves, the loneliness inside. Tightening his cloak around him to fend off the cold, he leaned his head back against the tree. With the warmth and weight of the dog beside him, he could feel exhaustion crawling back in. The past days had been harsh, even if he'd spent them mostly in a haze of grief. And the future didn't seem any brighter. Maker, he had no idea where to even start fighting this Blight, and how to bring Loghain to justice for what he'd done. Though he owed it to Duncan... to them all, to at least try his best, to fulfill his duty as a Warden. Swallowing thickly, Alistair looked down at the dog.

"But I am still glad you're here, Revas."

Thunder rumbled in the distance and a bolt of lightning cracked the darkened sky in two as she ran. Torrential rain poured down in icy sheets upon her face like needles, but, in her haste to get away, Lenya didn't care.

The sudden shift in weather suited her, for it would make it easier to hide her tracks, to keep him - this damn Warden leader shemlen - from following her. Lenya had waited until he was fast asleep and then snuck out of their makeshift camp. Under cover of night, the first part of her escape had been easy: planting a few false tracks here and there and using her heightened sight to her advantage in the darkness. But now morning had broken and, with it, the shem's awareness of her absence. More than getting hit by lightning while running across these open plains, Lenya feared she was too simple a target to spot. His heavy armor would normally slow him down in his pursuit, if it weren't for his damn horse. Gasping for air and with her legs and lungs burning, she also knew that she couldn't keep this up for much longer. Even trained and fit as she was as a hunter, brief spurts in between slower walking was all she could manage after hours of flight, and that was slowly becoming cumbersome, too. Hunting for her clan had always been more about endurance and the patience to wait for the perfect kill than long trekking.

Lenya gritted her teeth and pushed forward through the smattering of rain. The wind screamed more than it howled, making her trek uphill all the more complicated. As she finally reached the top of it, she recognized the pattern of the sparse trees in between green, lush hills in the distance. She had been here before, dragged away from her clan and thrown over the shoulder of the Warden shem. It would be another day's march until she could slip into the Brecilian Forest again, but at least she knew she was on the right track. Another advantage of the weather was that the heavy rain would quickly wipe away any of her footprints left in the muddy soil.

An hour later, the storm had dwindled down to normal rainfall. Drenched to the bone, Lenya reached the mouth of a river. Following it upwards would eventually lead her into the forest again, back to her clan. If they were still there. She shook her head, refusing to follow this thought further. Even with the sickness and exhaustion wearing her down, she couldn't let herself doubt now, not now that she was so close to being back where she belonged. Like a promise, she kept hold of the thought of home and continued onward with hasty steps.

At the point where the river split in two, she saw a bay horse grazing, looking frighteningly like the one the - oh no. "It seems you have forgotten that I am a rogue too, Mahariel," a voice behind her
said. "I know all the tricks, believe me." Lenya didn't need to turn around to know that it was the damn shem. Frozen in her track as she was in her shock, any movement was momentarily impossible anyway.

No, no, no. How could it be? How did he-

"Nor do you seem to remember how you have tried to escape once already." She felt him approaching, and her muscles tensed in response. She'd fight, if needed. "I'd underestimated the weather, or I would have cut off your way sooner."

"You cannot force me to go with you, shemlen!"

"I have conscripted you, and your Keeper has acknowledged this right, so according to the rules of my order-"

"Fuck your rules," she spat out, pressing her hands into fists.

He came closer still, and Lenya prepared herself for an attack. "So despite me having a cure for your sickness... you would rather die?"

The rain drops ran down her face, mixing with the tears she wasn't able to blink away. "Yes," she uttered, suddenly sounding not so sure.

"Ah..." Duncan only said. "I was hoping to avoid that, but you are leaving me no choice." Before Lenya had time to wonder what these words meant, something connected with the back of her head and her world went black.

Lenya woke with a gasp and stared blearily into the darkness of camp. Her hand reached back to feel the bump on her skull that wasn't there, not anymore. The heat of the glowing embers closeby and the absence of both her dog and her fellow Warden were the next things she registered.

"'Tis a good thing you woke up on your own. Otherwise I would have woken you."

"I -" Lenya swallowed heavily, blinking at the witch who rolled her eyes.

"You were talking in your sleep, elf. Quite insistently and loud, I might add."

"Lenya."

Morrigan frowned at her. "What?"

"I recall us exchanging names when we met, Morrigan," Lenya said with a small scoff in her voice, putting extra emphasis on her name. "Since I can remember yours, I wonder why you struggle to do the same with mine?"

She fixed her with a stare. "Because such is a thing one has to earn?"

"What? My name? It was freely given to me by my parents." The corners of her mouth twitch upwards, as the next words came to her mind. "Words that should be very familiar to the human. "You do not assume I spawned from a log, do you?"

"How generous of them," the witch said, not missing a beat, and clicked her tongue. "Are they the reason why you are so eager to run back to your clan?"
"No." The smell of grilled deer meat wafted into her nose and her rumbling stomach distracted her for a moment. "They are both dead."

"Oh..." Morrigan glanced away. Her posture deflated just as her smugness did. "My condolences then, however little they will mean to you."

"They are still appreciated, Morrigan," Lenya said and was surprised to notice that she meant it. "Now, can we use our names for each other, going forward? It seems as if we are stuck together, so doing so would make at least some of it easier."

"Yes." She nodded after a moment of deliberation. "I would, indeed. And you seem more bearable than your... fellow Warden."

"Coming from you, that is a very low bar to cross, but... I’ll take it.” Shaking her head, Lenya stood up and walked past the empty place by the campfire where the shem should have been. Why was he still absent?

Slipping past their camp's perimeter, she found him leaning against a tree with his chin resting on his chest. She couldn't see his face due to the hood drawn deep over his head, but, motionless as he was, he was obviously asleep. Revas lay stretched out across the human's legs, serving as a source of warmth and comfort.

Good. He was annoying, but - shemlen or not - she knew exactly how he felt. He had lost his clan, too.

Alistair. She recalled his name as she quietly turned away, and her prior words to Morrigan came back to her mind. Not shemlen.

Maybe she should start calling him by his name too.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes: I kept some vague elements of the old version, such as Morrigan's frustration about her mother, Lenya's blind hatred of darkspawn, which she blames for her fate and Lenya sending her dog to Alistair for solace.

The most obvious change was the name of the Mabari, who now is called Revas and no longer Arai. The name simply fits Lenya and her reasons for it better. I also focused more on Alistair's grief once more, since it doesn't magically vanish from one day to the other and needs to be addressed. Lenya is also quicker ready to use Alistair's actual name than in my old version, which has story but also technical writing reasons, since calling him "warden shem" all the time gets old and impractical fast.

Please leave a comment, no matter how brief, what you liked/not liked. And/or kudos because feedback is lurve and helps to improve my writing ;)
Finally reaching Lothering, it doesn't turn out to be the place Lenya hoped it to be. Instead of the helpful village, it is a miserable sinkhole built upon a muddy green, stuffed with people and despair. But maybe they still can find something of gain here?

Many thanks as always to my wonderful beta reader heffalumps for her grammar/awkward wording fix.
Well, at least the witch kept her promise of using her name. Which didn't change the fact that she was not in the mood to deal with these assholes. Even if Lenya had had the money, she would rather have eaten it than give it to these idiots. Glowering at the smug bastard, out of the corner of her eye, she noted how Morrigan and Alistair spread out to each corner of the bridge, ready to fight. Revas stayed at her side and bared his fangs, each muscle of his large body tense. "Tell you what..." Grabbing the leader's arm, which hung loose at his side, she twisted it swiftly behind his back, forcing him to kneel. Her unsheathed, curved dagger was pressed to his bared throat in an instant. "...how about you give us all of your money instead? See as as a donation to the Wardens, for a good cause."

The sound of steel being drawn on both sides rang through the air. Though the bandits seemed to hesitate, unsure how to proceed. "Grey Wardens? Them are the ones having killed the king," the fool named Hanric said, wide-eyed. "We should have really let them pass."

"Oh sorry." The shem screamed as Lenya twisted his arm further, to the point of near-breaking. Her boots were firmly planted on the backs of his knees, adding further strain to his body. "I should not have posed these words as a question. All of your money. Now!"

"Sooo..." Her fellow Warden deliberately moved into her field of vision, covering her empty left flank. He had his shield and sword lowered again, but she had seen him fight. She knew this casual pose was as much an act to fool the men as it was part of his annoying self. He threw her a lopsided grin. "We're robbing bandits now? Oh, fun."

"Tis certainly an... interesting approach." Morrigan sounded way too pleased with the situation. "I will collect their money then."

"Oh, I have no doubt you would want to do that, witch." The shem... Alistair, she reminded herself, put extra emphasis on his last word. It was as much contempt as it was a reminder to the bandits that they had a mage in their ranks - if they had been too blind and stupid to notice it yet. Given this particular group, Lenya wouldn't put it past them.

Blood trickled down her polished silverite dagger as it nicked the bandit leader’s throat. He let out a whimper as he looked up at his men. "Okay, okay. Do as they say. Just... don't kill me, elf!"

"That remains to be seen, shem'alus!" She fixed the shemlen with a scowl. "After that, you leave, or he dies. And with him, all of you as well."

"Them Grey Wardens are good. I mean, really good." There was a slight awe in the idiot's voice as he came forward to leave his coin purse on top of the wooden box next to Morrigan. "No wonder them's have killed a king."

"We did no such thing!" Alistair snapped, urging the stocky shemlen to leave faster. Pained screams rang through the air as the next one attempted an attack and got his arm torn to shreds by Revas. Witnessing the mabari's prowess, his two other companions suddenly seemed way more motivated to put distance between themselves and her group. After leaving their money, of course.

Which only left their leader to deal with.

"Maker..." he gasped, actually crying now. "Please, please don't kill me." She had heard the exact same phrase out of a shemlen's mouth before. Back in the Brecilian Forest, at his side, with a shem held at arrowpoint. Before releasing the bowstring, before they discovered the ruins and everythi -

"Lenya?" She blinked quickly to find Alistair frowning at her, drowning out the memories. Unfortunately, he was as observant as he was annoying. "Shouldn't we let him go? Let's just avoid
unneeded bloodshed, right?"

"Yes, yes. Please, " the shem bandit sobbed. "We - I just tried to survive. Same as you, Warden!"

Her blade pressed closer to his throat. "I am nothing like you, scum." His sobbing grew in intensity and volume until a wet puddle pooled in between - ugh.

"Ugh." Lenya grimaced and took a tentative step back, realizing the bandit had peed himself. "Humans are disgusting."

"Well... thanks." Her fellow Warden cleared his throat. Based on how the corner of his mouth twitched upwards, it was more to cover up the need to laugh than from embarrassment. "I can't exactly blame him, though. You are kind of terrifying, Lenya."

"Good." She threw him a look, then turned her attention back to the sobbing mess of a bandit still at her mercy. "Run. And never come back!" Releasing her hold on him, she gave him a harsh shove. The man scrambled to his feet and fled as if the dread wolf were after him.

"How amusing." Having finished counting and pocketing the money, Morrigan scowled at her, while Revas still gnawed on a piece of... hand. Lovely. At least Lenya wouldn't have to feed him for next few hours. "Can we proceed to the village now? There is much that we need and far less time to get it than I would like."

Alistair let out a snort. "Why? You got an important appointment somewhere?" At first, it looked as if the witch would humor him, but then she simply settled for scowling at him. "Hey, what about our money?" he asked, his tone whiny.

"If you continue asking, I will keep it, fool!" With that, Morrigan stalked away, leaving Lenya no other choice than to follow both humans down the bridge's ramp and into the village.

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Lothering was not what Lenya had expected it to be.

In fact, she wasn't quite sure what she had expected of the first shemlen village she'd ever set foot in, but it wasn't this. Not a miserable sinkhole built upon a muddy green, stuffed with people and mismatching houses of wood and rushes. Creators, there were far more people than a village of this size should have. It was of course not like Ostagar, but the noise of them talking and their children wailing without relent was a similar onslaught on her senses. And so was the smell. It reeked of mud and stale sweat mixed with smoke and too many different things she couldn't pinpoint, which, oddly enough, completed the picture of misery. Lenya closed her eyes and drew in hasty gasps of air to curb her nerves. Unsurprisingly, this only made breathing harder instead of calming her, but she refused to take in the foul air through her nose.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and reopened her eyes to see that it was his. "Your first time in a human village, I take it?"

More peeved with herself than him for being so easily readable, she shrugged Alistair's hand off with a scowl. Then she turned toward Morrigan, if only to mask her own insecurity. "What are we going to do now?" Why are we here? was what Lenya actually wanted to ask, for this place didn't seem to offer anything they could need. Revas nudged her gloved hand with a whine, and she gave
his ear a brief ruffle.

"I hate to say it, but we pretty much stand out among the others," the human puppy said as he surveyed the area. He pointed at the witch. "Especially with, ugh, her in tow. The village is full of templars, in case you haven't noticed."

"Oh how I tremble in fear," Morrigan only rolled her eyes at him. "To answer your far more sensible question, Lenya, we shall visit the town's tavern to gather more information. Though I doubt any of these simpletons here are able to give us what we seek."

Her fellow Warden scoffed. "Oh, that is your plan?"

"We could also go after your enemy directly. Find this Loghain, kill him and then deal with the Blight."

Lenya noticed how he hesitated and tensed, as if actually considering her option."Yes, Morrigan," he replied belatedly, his tone pure sarcasm. "He certainly wouldn't see that coming. It is not like he has the advantage of an army or experience and." Alistair stopped himself with a sigh. "The tavern it is."

They had barely proceeded further into the village when a heavily armored shemlen stepped into their way. His whole head was covered by a helmet, leaving only his blue eyes visible through a slit. "You there!"

"Case in point," Alistair whispered, sing-song.

"If you search for shelter, you'd better move on," the man said, pointing behind himself. His voice sounded tinned through the helmet. "We've had refugees streaming from the south for the last two days. The chantry and the tavern are full to bursting. There simply isn't enough food to go around, and we templars can barely keep order."

Ah. Lenya's stare shifted to a glower. So this was a templar. She had heard stories within her clan, of course, but she had never seen one in person. They were the ones trying to find clans to eradicate the 'forbidden magic', like these assholes called it, and to kill the Keeper and the whole clan with them, when found. "What?" she challenged, invading his space. "Will you stop me from entering, shem?"

Taken aback by her sudden fury, he stepped back. "N-no, of course not. I'm just warning you things may not be as hospitable as you'd expect. People are frightened, as the Bann has moved on with his soldiers, leaving them to their fate here."

"So... Lothering is lost?" Next to her, Alistair gasped, all humor gone.

The templar nodded. "It will be, as soon the horde reaches these parts. We templars stay as the last line of defense and will try to evacuate as many people as possible, but it is best if you do not linger."

Huh. That explained the hectic commotion within the village, then. People were running back and forth, loading their wagons with their possessions. It was a stark contrast to the refugees huddled in alleys or camping in the open air - they didn't appear to be in a hurry. "Thank you," Lenya heard Alistair say, even as Morrigan groaned. Revas barked happily, seemed eager to move on.

Before they could even reach the large building on the other side of a foul-smelling river, there was another shemlen who caught sight of them and called out to them.
"Ho! You there!" The man made a beeline toward... Alistair? Lenya eyed the shemlen as he approached. There was nothing special about him. Light skin, roughened by the weather. Dark, short hair and a slight beard. And his bushy eyebrows looked as if drawn into a permanent frown. What was it with shemlen and all that facial hair, though? "You look able! Would you care to make a tiny profit helping a beleaguered businessman?"

Her fellow Warden only blinked at him, dumbfounded.

Right on the merchant's heels followed a sour-faced elderly shem. Her long brown hair was wound back tightly to frame her harsh, pale face. She was wearing the same dress Lenya had seen on a woman in Ostagar, minus the weird head garment. "He is charging outlandish prices for things people desperately need! Their blood is filling his pockets!" Her voice wasn't exactly pleasant, though Lenya didn't understand why Alistair flinched upon hearing her speak up.

"I have limited supplies," the merchant shem argued. "The people decide what those supplies are worth to them."

"You profit from their misfortune!" The old woman raised her voice further, which led to more wincing from her fellow Warden. "I should have the templars give away everything in your carts!"

"You wouldn't dare!" The shem whirled around to face the onlooker, furious. "Any of you step too close to my goods, I'll-"

"It is so nice to see everyone working together in a crisis," Alistair said, every one of his words dripping in sarcasm. By now Lenya wondered if he could even form a single sentence without it. "Warms the heart, really."

"'Tis only survival of the fittest," Morrigan scoffed, crossing her arms. "All these cretins would do the same in his shoes, given the chance."

"Warden!" He flinched upon the merchant's usage of his title, which, given his armor, wasn't really surprising. The griffon etched into the breastplate was still visible, despite the dark-green cloak slung around his broad shoulders. "I don't care if you have killed the king, or not. I've a hundred silvers if you'll drive this rabble off, starting with that priest. I'm an honest merchant, nothing more."

"We have done nothing like tha -" Alistair began, bristling, but was interrupted by the cleric.

"An honest businessman?" the woman scoffed. "You bought most of your wares from these same people last week! Now they flee for their lives, and you charge thrice as much, using their desperation to make a fortune."

"Must we solve every petty squabble for these fools? Shall we start rescuing tiny kittens from trees next? Let them be - and let us move on." Morrigan turned away with a groan, fed up with listening to them bickering without pause. Lenya was tempted to do the same. They could use the money, but by now it wasn't worth the headache it had caused.

"I agree," the Dalish said with a scowl in the shemlens' direction. "This isn't our problem."

Her fellow Warden hesitated, looking as if he wanted to protest, and the merchant mistook his hesitance as agreement with the others.

"Pah, if you don't want my money or wares, so be it!" Throwing his hands up, the man whipped around in anger. "I am leaving!"
"I don't think so," said a new, melodic voice emerging from behind the onlookers. The people moved aside, making way for a shemlen woman clad in an elaborate, heavy armor. Her freckled, brown skin had a rich, deep earthen tone with a faint reddish hue. It reminded Lenya of the color of the clay pots her clan used. It was similar to Alistair’s skin tone, but the woman was still another shade or two darker than him. She wore her jet-black hair in a long bowl cut and towered over the merchant as she stepped in his way.

"H-Hawke," The man managed to shriek, seeming to shrink even more. "I thought you had already left?"

"Sefric, Sefric, you slimy little worm." Her full lips curled back to a sardonic smile, the woman called Hawke shook her head. The motion caused her bangs to fall into her brown eyes. Blinking them away, she clicked her tongue. "I suppose you would have liked that, huh? Me being gone?"

"N-no," the shemlen held up a hand, but it did little to placate the woman who kept approaching him, no matter how far he backed away. "I simply heard that you and your family already packed up your stuff and fled from the incoming darkspawn horde..."

"But Sefric..." Hawke's smile widened as the man's back hit the rough stone wall behind him. Without effort, she yanked him up by the collar with one gloved hand and stared him down as he dangled half a foot above the ground. "...how could I ever leave without saying goodbye to an old friend?"

"Wow..." Lenya heard Alistair utter next to her and rolled her eyes. Though if she was honest, she was impressed, too. At least a bit. This shemlen seemed to be so very different from the whimpering cattle that usually cowered in the village's corners. Unlike them, she bore herself with the natural confidence of a trained warrior.

"H-Hawke, please, I -" the merchant begun, but was interrupted by another voice calling out for someone.

"Mia..." A younger woman pushed through the now considerable bulk of onlookers. Her black hair was longer and curlier, and she was smaller in frame and height than Hawke, but otherwise they resembled each other. Both had the same brown skin and a similarly long, somewhat broad nose and oblong face. "There you are, sister." Ah. That explained the similarities between them. "I have been looking all over for you. Mother is waiting for us."

"Bethany..." Hawke said with her sweetest voice, her smile fake. "... I was only giving our dear friend Sefric some advice before leaving." She stepped back and let go of the man, letting him plop down to the ground ass first. The man scrambled to his feet and started to flee, but her armored palm planted firmly on the stone wall prevented him from moving further. "Sharing is caring, isn't it, sister dear?"

The younger woman shifted from one foot to the other and frowned at her sister. "Er... what is this about?"

"Sefric overpricing his wares and now, when he has been found out, trying to fuck off."

Bethany's stance relaxed, and she smiled. "Then sharing is definitely the answer."

"Aww, see, we are getting along so well." Hawke turned back to the man. "Don't you think?" The merchant nodded hastily. "Good, good. And to show that, you are not only going to stop your overpricing, but give each of the villagers a discount on your wares." She stopped to look at Alistair with a grin. "Since it would be nice to see everyone working together in a crisis." Her
fellow Warden bestowed the re-purposing of his words with a small chuckle. "Are we clear, my friend?" The unhappy shemlen nodded again, if only to save his hide. As soon Hawke backed away, he ran off in the other direction, without his wagon or wares.

"Warden..." With the problem solved, Hawke switched her attention to them, while the on-lookers slowly dispersed. "I heard Sefric promised you a hundred silver for helping him?" She flipped Lenya a golden coin. "Here are a hundred for not helping him. Figured that, with Ostagar gone to shit, you gotta need it."

"Thank you, Mia."

"The priest emerged from the crowd and patted the human on her broad, armored back. "You have helped a lot of people today."

Hawke shrugged and snorted. "Oh, you know me, Rilah - always happy to be helping or punching people. Preferably both."

"As do I, sister," Bethany said with a hint of amusement. "Carver had bet you wouldn't leave Lothering without creating chaos one final time. I suppose he was right."

"For what it is worth," the cleric shem said. "I am glad you did, Hawke. Even if your methods are a bit... unconventional. May the Maker be with you on your journey."

"And with you, Warden. If you'll excuse me, I have to return to my duties." With that, the human left in the direction of the huge building on the other side of the river.

"You better be careful when flashing your armor about here in Lothering... or anywhere, quite frankly." Hawke's brown eyes narrowed into a frown. "Teyrn Loghain has put a bounty on the head of any surviving Grey Wardens, which naturally includes both of you. For murdering the King."

She tilted her head, her frown deepening as she looked at them.

"You don't believe we did it," Alistair stated, sounding surprised.

"Well, yeah, obviously we don't," Bethany spoke up. There was something odd about the young woman. While she was around the same age as Lenya, every one of her movements were measured, a bit stilted as if rehearsed a dozen times or more. And the Dalish could feel the residue of the Beyond around her, no matter how hard she tried to suppress it. "Mia has served at Ostagar in the army, along with our brother Carver. They barely escaped with their lives... " She lowered her voice. "...Teyrn Loghain fled the field."

"Lucky you..." There was a clear bitterness in her fellow Warden's tone. "I was there too. I lost..."

"Yeah, gotta say... " Hawke sighed. "Still surprised there are even survivors from your order. And... such an odd pair, at that."

"Mia."

"Her sister laughed, rendering her scolding words ineffective. "Don't be rude."

"Oh, believe me," Lenya said with a scoff. "That is not by choice. But... " She sighed. "... here we are. In a shitty shemlen dirthole in the ass-end of nowhere. Not sure how being here will help us..."

"Lenya raised her hands to make sarcastic air quotes. "Fight the Blight... but whatever."

"Wow... you are quite the jaded one, aren't you?" Lenya glared at the larger shem, which only seemed to increase her amusement. "This is my home village you are insulting here, by the way. Though I gotta say, your assessment of its state is fair, in a way. People are desperate. Those who
can leave Lothering do, and should."

"Like you?" Lenya asked.

"Yes." The human nodded. "We heard rumors that the village lies in the way of the approaching horde, that they will be here soon. With the Blight and all, gotta protect my family, you understand, surely?"

"Yeah..." Alistair breathed, shakily. "Though we also could use your help on our travels. Hawke, it was, right?"

"Mia... but no, can't do that, sorry." She shrugged. "We are about to leave Ferelden and, if you are smart, Warden, you gotta do the same. Hardly the time to play hero; it will only get you both killed." Lenya threw her fellow Warden a knowing look, for this shemlen was right.

"Well, that is not an option," he replied. "... for us, anyway."

"Suit yourself, then." She shrugged and her eyes strayed to her sister, who was amusing herself by petting Revas. The mabari rolled on his back and stretched all four legs toward the sky. "Bethany... You are aware we have our own mabari? Don't come running to me and complaining that Barkus won't even look at you."

"Yes, but he is so cute..." Revas bestowed her words with a playful woof, and his tongue lolled out of his mouth. The human withdrew her hand suddenly and grimaced as she looked at it. "Wait... is that blood?" The hound had done a good job of licking himself... ugh... clean after gnawing on the bandit's arm, but apparently he hadn't been careful enough.

"Anyway," Mia turned back to them, ignoring her sister's change of mood. "There is one last tip I've got for you, Wardens. In the tavern down there, there are soldiers looking for you. Loghain's men, I suppose, and real pains in the ass. Had more run-ins with those assholes these past days than I care to count. So maybe you can repay me for my money and deal with them, huh? Would help Lothering, too, and you look as if you can handle it."

"Be careful," Bethany warned them as she frantically wiped her hands on her dark leather tunic. "And all the best on your travels."

"Likewise," Alistair inclined his head. "And thank you for the tip and money. We will put both to good use."

Hawke turned around with a wink. "Oh, I'm sure you will, handsome."

Her sister nudged her arm. "Mia!"

"What?" Hawke smirked at her. Lenya never had wished for deafness more than now. "He is." Alistair cleared his throat. "Well... that was... interesting."

"Tis one way to put it," Morrigan sneered, speaking up after a long while of silence. "Another would be: excruciating and a pointless waste of our time."

"Damn, you are still here, Morrigan?" he gasped, feigning shock. "And here I thought you had slithered away. Maybe even joined the other snakes living in the bushes. Aww, bummer."

"Right," Lenya said, interrupting whatever retort the witch had on her lips. She started to walk toward the large building on the east side. "Let's meet and deal with Loghain's men, then."
"I surrender! Maker, have mercy!"

Wide-eyed and kneeling in the blood of his fallen comrades, the human stared up at Lenya and her blade, held at the ready over his head. True to Hawke's words, they had found Loghain's soldiers in the tavern. Their laughter and arrogance still rang in Lenya's ears, along with her quickened breath and the rush of adrenaline from the brief but brutal fight.

"Have you not done enough?" a soft, lilting voice said, far too accusatory in its tone. The person it belonged to appeared right after. It was a red-headed woman dressed in the same orange-red robe the priest outside had worn. The damn Chantry again. Her fair, freckled skin was splattered with the blood that had been spilled in the dispute. The shemlen's blue eyes fixed on the sole survivor of Loghain's hounds, her expression stern. "Look around you," she prompted. "People are frightened."

The tavern was packed to bursting with people, who all pressed themselves to the furthest corner of the wall. The air reeked of sweat, blood and cheap ale.

"Yes, because they attacked us!" Alistair snapped, unusually blunt and aggressive. Given the soldier's prior taunts about Loghain being right and just, his bad mood was no surprise.

"But it is over now, yes?" Her voice had a strange, foreign accent Lenya couldn't place. "We can stop fighting. Show him mercy."

"Mercy?" Her fellow Warden rushed forward, sword still in hand. "Just as they have shown us?"

"Who are you to decide that, sister?" Lenya narrowed her eyes, feeling Revas tensing again at her side. His hackles raised, he growled at the kneeling captain, whose throat was at the perfect height for his teeth. She only had to wave her hand, and her Mabari would jump and end him.

Of course the sister had to step in front of the shemlen, ruining this perfectly fine plan. Foolish of her to turn her back on the still fully armed and trained soldier, but this was the least important point on the list of issues now. "They - he - has learned the lesson, and enough blood has been shed." The woman looked at her. "You are better than to murder a man who has surrendered. They said you are Grey Wardens."

Not willingly, Lenya thought bitterly, before lifting her chin to glare at the human. Raw anger twisted her voice. "I don't want him to report back to his filthy shem general!"

"N-no," the man behind her wailed, sounding ready to snap. "I will not die here!" Then everything happened so fast. Jolting back on his feet, he attempted to grab the sister from behind. Though the woman somehow anticipated the movement and with a practiced turn evaded his deadlock. Without thinking, she used the momentum to ram her dagger into his throat. He gasped a final, desperate breath, wide-eyed as he had been while begging for mercy, and sank to the ground. The dull thump his now lifeless body made was deafening in the stillness of the tavern.

Behind herself, Lenya heard Morrigan chuckle. "'Tis ironic to hear the sister prattle on about mercy, only to have him die by her hand, isn't it?"

"Maker... I didn't..." The shemlen clasped her hand over her mouth, shaking. She swallowed thickly, her other hand clenched into a fist as she methodically calmed herself down with measured intakes of air. This hadn't been her first kill. Everything about it had looked practiced. Her
movement, in particular, was pure reaction from muscle memory. She was a trained fighter. "He...
left me no choice."

Reluctantly, Lenya lowered her own weapons and hushed Revas' growling. "Just... who are you?"

Letting her hand fall back at her side, the human smiled at her as if nothing had happened. "I am Leliana, one of the lay sisters of the chantry here in Lothering. Or I was."

"...was?" Alistair echoed, frowning. He too sheathed his weapon and put the shield down at his feet.

"I wasn't born in the Chantry, you know." She tilted her head, blue eyes piercing as she observed him, though a small smile played around her rosy lips. "Many of us had more... colorful lives before we joined." At least the shem wasn't even trying to deny it.

Lenya snorted. "Obviously."

"You will be battling the darkspawn, yes? I know after what happened you'll need all the help you can get." The shemlen spoke quickly, not missing a beat. "That's why I'm coming along. It is the Maker's will for me."

"What?" Both Wardens asked in unison. Odd how this was the first thing they agreed upon.

Leliana smiled at them. "The Maker told me to join you. Surely He wouldn't do so without good reason."

"Ooookay. Backing away slowly now," she said and motioned for her Mabari to follow. "Come, Revas, we are leaving." This human was clearly missing more than a few wheels on her araval.

"Please, wait. I-I know this sounds... absolutely insane. But it is true. I had a dream, a vision!"

"And this is helping your case... how?"

"More crazy?" Alistair shook his head. "I thought we already covered this part with Morrigan." Turning around to the witch, he feigned a confused blink."Oh... you're still here? I keep forgetting that, sorry."

"I can jog the failed templar's faulty brain with a fireball, if needed," she remarked casually - though even the most nonchalant reply sounded like a threat on Morrigan's lips.

"I have not failed my training," he scoffed in return, all humor gone. "I have been recruited to the Grey Wardens. Obviously."

"Oh... most touchy, aren't we?" She raised her free hand to him. "And if you had not been recruited? What would have happened, instead?"

He rolled his eyes at her and kept his voice deliberately monotone. "I would have turned into a drooling lunatic, slaughtered the grand cleric and run through the streets of Denerim in my smallclothes, I guess."

She threw him a smug smile. "Your self-awareness does you credit."

"Huh, yeah, I thought you would like that."

Lenya pinched the bridge of her nose and counted up to ten in the attempt to not murderstab her fellow Warden and the bickering witch. Maybe a buffer between these insufferable, noisy shemlen
would not be the worst idea. Even if said buffer was utterly insane with her visions and blathering about her shem god. She most likely going to regret this, but nevertheless Lenya turned around and away from the door. Unfortunately, the loony woman took this as an invitation to continue talking.

"What you do, what you are meant to do, is the Maker's work."

"Yeah, yeah." Shut up. "You can fight, I take it?"

"I can fight, yes. More than that, even." Leliana smiled at her, pleased with the turn of events. "As I said before, I wasn't always a lay sister. I have put aside that life before coming here, but if it helps you, I will pick it up again gladly."

"Good," Lenya said, waving her off. "Get rid of that ridiculous robe, then you can come with us."

She ignored her companions' objections as she rushed to the door and outside. She needed to get away. From all these shemlen staring at her, from the sour smell of the tavern burning in her nose, and from the noise of all the humans here.

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Alistair was hot on her heels, but she was quicker. "Lenya, wait!"

His voice prompted her to stop at some distance, at least. Next to her, Revas barked out, as if waiting for Alistair to speak up. Before he had a chance to, the sound of the door of the tavern opening and closing distracted him.

"You forgot your shield," a lilting voice said, and he watched as she put it down next to him in the muddy grass.

Alistair glanced up to see the lay sister standing next to him. Her chantry robe and face were covered in blood splatter, though he didn't look any cleaner. "T-Thanks," he managed, "Your name is Leliana, right?"

The woman nodded and pointed in Lenya’s direction. "I don't think your leader likes me much."

"That makes two of us." His laugh was humorless. Alistair was about to turn back to an already distant Lenya, as her words registered with him. "L-leader?"

"Yes. Is she not?"

"I -" If he was honest, he had never thought about it, caught up in his grief as he had been these past few weeks. "We never discussed that," he admitted and gave up on the plan of following his fellow Warden, who was by now only a tiny dot in the distance. He could only hope she would return, given her tendency to flee.

"Oh?" Leliana tilted her head, causing her chin-long, auburn hair to fall aside. "I didn't mean to assume... but she is quite forceful, no?"

He had to suppress a grin at her careful choice of words, for they were an understatement. "Yeah, I guess Lenya is, at that." Only now he realized how he had fallen in line with his fellow Warden, how he had left most of the decisions to her, if not all of them. It seemed to be for the better,
especially right now with all that had happened. Even if he was her senior Warden - by the grand
total of six months, wow - he was no leader and never would be.

Alistair felt the woman's gaze upon him and squirmed a little, disliking the scrutiny. "You both
seem very young too," she stated and sat down on a wooden barrel standing close to the tavern. All
of her motions were graceful but seemed controlled and calculated at the same time. Obviously
there was more to her than crazy talk about the Maker.

"What?" Alistair snorted, crossing his arms. "Did your vision not show you that?"

"I know it sounds stupid, but please believe me, it is the truth." She groaned, rubbing her hand over
her eyes. "Since we will be working together, can we please start over? I didn't quite catch your
name, Warden."

"Alistair." He shrugged. "Not that anyone uses my name these days, though. Not since -" His voice
cracked, swallowing the end of his sentence as he glanced away.

"I heard of Ostagar; we all did. Hawke... she was there, with her brother." Her voice dropped,
becoming soft and understanding. He couldn't even remember when someone had last spoken to
him in such a tone. "I did not believe the Teyrn's lies. The Grey Wardens are just, they would never
betray the king. And many good people lost their lives when Loghain quit the field. It is simply not
right!"

"Yeah..." His voice was barely more than a whisper. His throat felt too tight to speak.

"I'm sorry, Alistair." Her concerned gaze threatened to vanish behind a haze of tears. "You must
have lost many friends that night."

Alistair turned his face away with a sharp intake of breath and refused to look at her for a long
moment. He could not break down- not again, not here. Inwardly he counted to ten, then twenty,
while pushing the tears back down. They could be dealt with later, when he had found a corner to
himself. "That accent- you’re Orlesian, right?" he deflected, his voice still shaky.

"Yes. I was born in Orlais and spent most of my life there, but my mother was Ferelden," she said,
and relief washed over him. A part of him wished for someone to confide in, to voice his grief, but she was still a literal stranger. Just like
your fellow Warden, the helpful bit of his brain supplied. He really hated that cynical bastard,
spilling out the things he wanted to hear - or think- least. "She was a servant to an Orlesian
noblewoman, who took me in after my mother's death," she added after a small pause.

"Yes. I was born in Orlais and spent most of my life there, but my mother was Ferelden," she said,
and relief washed over him. She wasn't going to push him to talk more about Ostagar. A part of
him wished for someone to confide in, to voice his grief, but she was still a literal stranger. Just like
your fellow Warden, the helpful bit of his brain supplied. He really hated that cynical bastard,
spilling out the things he wanted to hear - or think- least. "She was a servant to an Orlesian
noblewoman, who took me in after my mother's death," she added after a small pause.

"I see," Alistair said, not sure what to make of that. "And how did you end up in Ferelden, as sister
of the Chantry, then?"

"My, curious, aren't you?" Leliana's laugh was bright and sounded a bit fake. "I was a traveling
minstrel in Orlais. Tales and songs were my life. I performed and the audience rewarded me with
applause and coin."

He frowned. "That doesn't answer my question."

"No?" Leliana gave him a pointed look. "Is it so hard to believe that after all my days spent on the
road, I longed for quiet contemplation and prayer? My path has led me here, back to the homeland
of my maternal family. And in effect the Maker has led me to you both, to aid you against this
Blight."

"I suppose." Alistair still wasn't convinced by the reply she gave, but decided to drop the issue. It
wasn't exactly as if he had been candid with his personal information, either. She could keep her little secrets. For now. "You must know Lothering like the back of your hand then, right?"

"Yes, of course. I have lived here for a few years now." She hopped down from the barrel and walked over to him. "We are working together now, yes? And I have promised to help you. So what do you need?"

"Honestly? Everything." He let out a little snort of laughter that quickly turned into a sigh. "We only have the clothes... err... armor on our back and were hoping to find supplies here. Needless to say, with what is happening, people haven't exactly been forthcoming."

"Oh..." Her face brightened. "I know people who can help us with our equipment, if you have enough coin."

"Yeeeeeah," he drawled, "A bout that... we have a bit, thanks to Hawke and clearing out some bandits on the road." Damn, that evil witch still had that money - where was she, even? Not that he missed Morrigan's company, but she was an apostate on the loose in a village with templars on each corner. If she got caught, they would lose these coins. "I'm not sure it will suffice, though."

"I know just the place, then," Leliana said and pulled the bloodstained robe over her head.

"Maker, Leliana!" Alistair shielded his eyes from the crazy woman stripping in public all of a sudden. "Time and place."

She only laughed. "It is sweet of you, but you can look, you know? I am not naked."

"You are... not?" He still refused to open his eyes, just to be safe.

"No, and why would I be?" She nuded his arm. "What do you take me for? There are many people around us."

"I don't know. I'm not the one who-" Slowly lowering his hand, Alistair saw her standing in front of him, in a set of fine, darkened leather armor. He felt the heat rising to his cheeks. "Oh, you were wearing your armor underneath the robe?"

"Aww, look at you, your cheeks are reddened." Her smirk was yet another telltale sign of how there was more to her than being a chantry sister. "You are adorable."

Unbelievable, she was teasing him. Though the lighthearted manner in which it was done made it easy to forgive. "And you are evil."

"Yes, yes." She waved him off and bunched the robe together to carry it under her arm. "And I told you I was expecting you, no? So it shouldn't surprise you that I was prepared."

"Well, that may be. However..." Alistair shook his head. "It would be for the better if you don't go around and tell everyone about your reasons to join us."

"You mean my vision?"

"Yeah, that." The less attention they drew unto themselves, the better. Especially with the bounty that had now been placed on their heads. Maybe he should dress down to simpler clothes and store the Warden armor in a safe place? Then again, it was all he had left and if it got stolen... no, no, no. He couldn't bear the thought. Besides, they already had barely enough money for equipment as it was, he didn't need to add to the list of things they needed.
Alistair let his eyes stray far beyond the muddy-green hills, toward the horizon. After all the rain in the past days, the weather was nice today. A clear blue sky stretched overhead and across the creaking windmills in the distance. The warmth of the sunlight upon his skin was welcomed and helped to keep his sadness at bay.

She must have noticed his wandering gaze, since he felt her eyes upon him. "What about your fellow Warden?"

"I think she simply needed a break from... all the people here. Lenya has never been in a human village before, after all."

"Oh?" she asked and brought her hand up to shade her eyes. "Has she told you that?"

"No," he said, and his words adopted a somewhat bitter note. "We don't talk much. She isn't exactly at my side by choice, you know?"

"I see," Leliana hummed, tapping her chin in thought. "But she stays at your side nonetheless, no? And I think that is what counts." Turning, the woman started to walk toward the bridge and the large building - the Chantry - behind it.

"Yeah..." he breathed and lingered for a last glance into the distance where Lenya had vanished. He could only hope she would return soon.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

I used some canon scenes that I rewrote to fit it in my story. Otherwise it is wholly new written chapter, with the goal to include my canon Hawke for a bit to make my verse more coherent. I also put the focus on Lenya and her discomfort to be under a large group of humans. Also yay for Leliana, who not only joins up much faster than in my old version, but also instantly gets along with Alistair.

Thank you for reading. Please consider leaving me a Kudos (if you haven't already) and/or a comment, if you enjoyed this new chapter. It would be much appreciated, and helps me to improve this story :)}
Little Talks

Chapter Summary

In between misunderstandings and other chaotic events in Lothering, there is still time for little talks between the two Wardens and/or their companions. Though it is hard to get to know each other when one party refused to engage with the other. This is the conclusion of the Lothering arc.

Chapter Notes

Normally it is the other way around, but hey I bring a birthday gift for you all. A new chapter after about two months. Whoops sorry about that, but busy beta reader is busy and I am not keen on publishing my chapter without it being proof-read, due to not being a native english speaker.

That being said, many thanks to heffalumps and withthebreezesblown for making this loooong chapter readable.

To his surprise, his fellow Warden returned only a half hour later. So did Morrigan, much to his dismay.

Without an explanation on where she had been, Lenya helped them complete the various tasks and odd jobs Leliana found for them on the Chanter's board or from the villagers. Acting as mediator between the Wardens and the people in Lothering, her bright and easy-going nature made negotiations with them a lot easier. In the end, it even earned them some extra coin for supplies from these tasks.

After clearing out a group of bandits lurking at the fringes of the village, the companions split up once more. Alistair took over the task of using their money to buy the required equipment, while Lenya opted to stay back and finish off the remaining tasks. Leliana had decided to keep an eye on Morrigan, probably to protect the witch from the templars and the other way around in equal measure.

Leaving the merchant's shop, Alistair steered toward the separated farmsteads in the back of the village. While the taint in Lenya's blood was still subdued, he was still able to pinpoint her whereabouts. He only had to concentrate on it a little harder, to hear and feel her presence. The newly purchased hunting bow slung over his shoulder, he peered into the distance, hoping to see her. The farmstead's high-grown golden-yellow crops were tinted a faint red by the afternoon sun.

He found her sitting in the field of farmer Barlin. Around Lenya, a large circle of wheat was trampled down and colored crimson. Alistair found the cause for that and her own bloodied appearance in the massive animal carcass closeby. Approaching, he noted how Revas was gnawing on what looked like a large paw.
"You... killed a bear?"

"It attacked me," she stated, not even looking up from grinding something to a paste in her mortar.

Of course. Alistair didn't even know why he was surprised about her being able to bring down a bear on her own. Lenya could probably force the archdemon into submission with a glare. The thought gave him a chuckle.

"What is so funny about that?" Stopping, she glanced up, her eyes sharp upon his. "I'm a trained hunter, shem."

Oh no, the bad 's' word. She probably thought he was ridiculing her, when it couldn't be any farther from the truth. He was impressed and terrified in equal amount. Damn, if he knew one thing about that woman, it was that she was scary, even without trying to be.

The smile vanished from his face. "It is not. You are just... terrifying."

"Good." Looking back down, Lenya continued her work, but he caught the upward quirk of her lip.

"May I?" Alistair pointed at a spot adjutant from her and only earned a shrug from her. He took it as permission to sit down. "Are these the healing salves for Elder Miriam you're preparing there?"

"Perhaps." Another shrug of her shoulders. "Or maybe it is poison I mix here. To sprinkle it onto your meal later on, if you continue to annoy me."

"Aww, no." Hugging his knees, the smile crept back into his expression. Unlike with Morrigan, with whom he had had the exact same conversation time and time again, Lenya's threat lacked the venomous edge. Her words were still biting, yes, but there was no disdain in her voice, like with the evil witch. "Then I would die and you would regret that."

Without looking at him, she huffed. "Are you sure about that, shem?"

"Yeeeee," he drawled, and an amused low rumble colored his voice. "Because then you would be alone with this mess of a Blight and..." Gasping, his words halted as he realized what they were. I don't want that. No one deserved to feel as alone as he had in countless nights after Ostagar. Not even the scowling, taciturn Dalish, who happened to be his fellow Warden he knew nothing about and who disliked humans and... Even so, her sense for practicality must have momentarily superseded all her disdain for humans, or she wouldn't be sitting here finishing off a task that would help sick human villagers. After killing a bear. Maker.

Lenya didn't reply, not verbally, at least. However, her shoulders tensed and the staccato of her pestle increased, growing frantic and angry. Uh oh. Alistair leaned back to create artificial distance between them. Just in case. Propped up on his hands, he leaned back a bit further and watched the tufts of clouds moving overhead. Like he did back in Redcliffe, as a kid. The moment would have been peaceful were it not for the steady clanking sound and the coppery smell of blood biting his nose. The ache in his muscles from days on the road didn't help either. Stretching briefly, Alistair sat up straight again with a sigh.

Lenya still did her best to ignore him. She sat cross-legged with a bundle of freshly plucked elfroot spread out before her and the vessel of mashed up herbs placed in her lap. A few sweat-damp strands clung to her face, which was streaked with dried remains of blood, but she didn't seem to mind. Her hair - bound with a cord to a long ponytail - had the same color as the wheat swaying in the mild breeze. Alistair huffed. What an odd detail to notice about this stranger, his fellow
Warden. His gaze briefly fell on the large mabari lying close to her, who did his best to ignore his presence, too. Typical. And yet it reminded him of something. Words which had run through his mind the whole day, after that last night in the woods.

"You know, underneath all the glares and grump, I think there is a really nice person in there somewhere."

Her movements stopped completely, then she looked up and at him. Though this time, her eyes weren't bearing their usual scowl or hardened stare, but surprise. Maybe a hint of shock, too. Alistair held her gaze for a moment, waiting for her to speak. Lenya's mouth moved in an attempt to form words, yet she remained silent with a frown. He took it as chance to elaborate on how he came to this conclusion. "It was you who sent Revas to me last night, right? That was kind of you. Thank you."

Lenya's frown deepened, but she didn't scowl. Her gaze remained open, if a bit confused. She blinked faster before averting her eyes. Fixing on a point in the distance, her voice adopted a quiet, sad note. "I know how it is to lose everything, everyone."

The breath caught in his throat while his gloved fingers bunched in the trampled wheat stalks in an attempt to ground himself. He regretted not having removed his gauntlets as his fingers itched with the need to feel the earth beneath him. Exhaling at last, the air left his throat in a shaky sigh. Her words struck him and his regret didn't end at the mere loss of tactile sensation. Caught up in his problems and grief, he hadn't even noticed how much Lenya had lost, too. Uprooted from her people, she had been thrown into this, without any say in the matter. No wonder she tried to escape as often as she did.

Maker, he had been so stupid.

"I'm sorry."

Her eyes focused back on him. "For what?"

"For not being the best company or help the past days and week." For being me, the helpful part of his mind added. Thanks again, brain. "For you having to leave your clan and your people."

Her lower lip trembled while her gloved fingers tightened around the pestle. The hardness returned to her features, turning her gaze into a glare. "I don't need your pity, human."

Ah. This seemed to be another thing Lenya tended to do. Recoiling and lashing out as soon someone tried to coax words out of her. Always distant, she didn’t share; her wounds and pain were her own. Alistair had to respect that and still he couldn't help but wonder why she did it.

Because she doesn't know or trust you. Right, but it was a bit hard to have these little talks to get to know each other when one party refused to engage in them. He let out a sigh, peering back upwards to the sky for a moment.

"Did it help?" Lenya asked so suddenly that her question didn't register with him at first. Even as it did and he looked back at her, he wasn't quite sure what she meant. "Revas..." she added. Upon hearing his name, the mabari sprang to his feet. Whining, the dog wagged his stumpy tail and headbutted her side as he begged for attention. Lenya gave it to him, in form of a few scratches of his head. He made it look so easy.

"Ugh, you are all bloody, fen!" She wrinkled her nose, and the mabari let out an offended wuff. Probably because Lenya didn't look much cleaner herself. Alistair watched the two interacting for a
bit and noticed one thing: She was at ease with the hound and spoke with and teased the animal like a friend. So Lenya wasn't as closed off or emotionally cold as she wanted people believe her to be. She just needed time, to be given the chance to open up at her own pace. Maybe she never would, but it wouldn't for lack of trying. He wanted to, needed to, even. Lenya was now the only other Grey Warden in Ferelden after all.

"Yes, it did help, at least a bit," he said after Revas had settled down again, and kept his eyes trained on the hound, for a bit.

"Good." Alistair could hear the smile in her voice, which was completely contrary to her prior harsh reaction. "Is that the hunting bow?" she asked after a small pause, pointing at his armored shoulder.

Oh, right. This had been the reason he had sought her out in the first place. Well, not the only one, if he was honest. Alistair shrugged the bow from his shoulder and handed it over to her. Lenya ran her fingers across the curved, simple wood, testing its flexibility with a frown. He knew nothing about bows, beyond that this one was much smaller in size than the one Leliana seemed to favor. Lenya sat upright, her posture rigid as she fully drew back the bowstring a couple times.

"It is garbage," Lenya stated, after relaxing the bowstring again. "The draw weight feels off. It is far too light."

"Why is that bad?" he asked.

"A bow is meant as a quick method to kill an animal on a hunt. Unless this is meant to slay hare only, it will cause larger game needless agony. If the impact is even enough to seriously wound the animal, so it cannot flee." She put the bow down with a scoff. "It feels like a toy of a da'len."

"So, bow bad. Got it." Shaking his head, he reclaimed the bow and tested it himself. He had the needed strength to draw the string back with ease, but lacked the expertise and endurance to keep it drawn with the correct poise. He probably looked -

"You look stupid." Ah, yeah, that. She verbalized what he already thought.

"Well - fitting then, right?" Alistair relaxed his posture and put the bow down. He folded his arms across his chest, the corner of his mouth twitching upward. "Since I am stupid."

"No, you are not," she immediately said, quietly but firmly. "Stupid, I mean. Just very, very annoying." It took him by surprise that she didn't lose a second to object his self-deprecating words. Given, only to add her own set of insults, but it was still... unexpected. Coming from her, it was almost praise.

For a moment he didn't know how to react to that - then the laughter bubbling up in his throat made the decision for him. "Look at me, moving up in the world. I feel honored."

"Ugh." Rolling her eyes, she made a face. He smiled to himself. Yep, that was more like it. Lenya reached beside her and handed him a small fabric bundle. It bore that faintly sweet elfroot smell. "I finished the salve bandages for this old shemlen. Can you take it to her?"

Slowly, he got up, aware of why she asked him. "It can be noisy, huh? Especially with all the refugees streaming in from the South."

Lenya glanced down at the bundle of elfroot in front of her and huffed. It sounded frustrated. For a moment, Alistair wondered what kind of person she had been before all this, back with her clan. He would never know, he supposed. Then again, he wasn't the same anymore, either. Not since jolting
awake in Flemeth's hut, aware of Loghain's betrayal. They both had lost so much, albeit in different ways.

And now they were here, together, fumbling toward a goal that was far too large for them. But there was no turning back anymore. No one would come and teach them how to fight against the Blight. Any Warden who could was miles and miles away, either in Orlais or further still, in Weißhaupt. There was no one, only them. Without him and his fellow Warden, Ferelden would be lost.

Great, no pressure.

"We can leave today," Alistair offered as the pause between them stretched until it was uncomfortable. "And we should, once we've gathered all the equipment we bought. Further down the Highway we will surely find a place to camp."

"What then?" Grinding her jaw, Lenya stared up into his eyes, and challenged him. "What then, huh?" she repeated, louder now. "After we leave this stinking shemlen village? Where do we go?"

"I don't know," he admitted, his voice small. Alistair wanted to tell her about Redcliffe, and Arl Eamon, but he feared what it meant. With the king dead, he - no. He couldn't even think it. It was all too much. Thus, he remained silent, the non-answer unsatisfying for both of them.

She jumped to her feet in a quick motion and invaded his space as she glared up at him. "This is absolutely insane, all of it is. I thought that when we reach this place then -" Lenya bit her lip, her body so tense he could feel her trembling. His fingers caged within the gauntlets twitched again with the need to touch, now to make it better. He knew he couldn't. He couldn't do anything. When she looked at him again with her perpetual scowl, her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "I did not run, because of what Asha'bellanar said, but now I believe that maybe I should have."

"Running away?" Anger twisted in his gut and quickly superseded his empathy for her. "Is that your answer to everything, Lenya?"

"Well..." Her eyes narrowed further, her lips held tight. "It is one more than you have, Alistair." This was the first time she'd ever used his actual name, and she pronounced it with scorn. It ruined the moment, the wish of hearing it from her lips. Not like this. "We cannot do this on our own. We should... -" She gestured wildly in the air, as if plucking the words from there. "...search for other Wardens. Let them handle this."

"There is no one else," Alistair snapped without meaning to, adding fuel where none was needed. "It is only us." His breathing became ragged and he pressed his eyes shut. Shit, not here, not now. It wasn't safe; he was not alone. He couldn't cry, shouldn't. Alistair swallowed, stifled, and yet it kept bubbling up. Not only fear but the remembrance of last night, the loneliness and desperation. "Don't leave me alone with this, please." He didn't recognize his own voice in these words, so tiny and frail. He hated its sound, the uphill battle against the grief constantly clawing at him.

When he clasped his mouth with one hand to hold back the outcry and felt hot, wet trails of tears across his cheeks, he knew he'd lost the struggle against it. Alistair lowered his head in shame, expecting mockery but earning only silence. He was aware of her presence, more than he even wanted to be. She still stood close, not having moved since his sudden words. Not daring to open his eyes and see her expression, Alistair listened to the uneven rhythm of her breath. She was so close he could smell the blood on her skin and the hint of herbs. Revas whined, sounding agitated and worried by the situation taking place.

"I am here, am I not?" she asked suddenly, making his head snap back up and his eyes open. Her
figure remained blurred through the tears.

Alistair blinked to clear his sight, exhaling shakily. "Y-yes. Yes you are." Thank you.

Her sigh sounded defeated. "Even if I don't know why."

"That makes two of us, I guess," Alistair said, his smile brittle but there. Then it struck him. Of course, why hadn't he thought earlier of it? "The treaties... have you looked at them yet?"

Crossing her arms, Lenya's brows creased together. "No... should I?"

Yes, he thought but refrained from voicing it. He didn't want to cause new strife. "There are three main groups that we have treaties for: The Dalish Elves, the Dwarves of Orzammar and the Circle of Magi."

Arms falling to her sides again, her eyes grew wide. "My people?"

"Yes... that would be the obvious choice, since you are." 

"No. Absolutely not!" Lenya interrupted him in a tone that left no room for discussion.

"Okay..." Why was she so vehement against seeking out her people first? Didn't she miss them? And... oh. That was exactly the problem, wasn't it? "We don't have to decide right now, Lenya," he amended, letting the topic slide for now. "I'm just saying that we have options and places to go to for help. We don't have to run like headless chicken across Ferelden. Unless..."

"Venavis, human," she groaned, rolling her eyes. "No more of your stupid jokes or words."

"My jokes and words are stupid, but I'm not? Huh, funny, that."

"Don't make me reconsider," she warned, but her annoyance only fanned his amusement. However, the carcass of the bear further across the field told him not to push his luck.

"Right, I'll get out of your hair then and deliver the potions. Salves. Medicine thingies. You know what I mean," Alistair pointed at the untouched bundle of elfroot at her feet. He had thought it was for Elder Miriam, but that seemed not to be the case. "What about these herbs there?"

"This is for our ration of medicine. I'll stay here and prepare them." With that, she settled back down on the ground and glanced up him. "Come back in an hour or two, but bring two large bags."

His brows wrinkled. "Bags? What for?"

"For the bear meat and fur, of course."

Of course. How stupid of him to dare to even ask. Given her incredulous look, Lenya thought the same.

****

An hour later and with his fellow Warden and a lot of bear meat in tow, Alistair met up with the rest of the group. Leliana, the size of her backpack significantly increased, was chatting away with some villagers, while Morrigan stared off into the distance, as if trying to will herself away from
the commotion and people around her by thought alone. Alistair wouldn't have minded if she actually were able to, as it would mean having to spend less time in her grating presence. However, there was still the issue of the money she had gotten from the bandits.

Turning to stare at him upon noticing his gaze, her eyes narrowed. "Have a care where your eyes linger, Alistair."

"Yes, well, don't worry. It's not what you think." It really wasn't. He would never look at her in that way, as a woman to be desired. Objectively speaking, the witch was beautiful, yes... yet it was a cold beauty, devoid of warmth and depth. Like a wyvern was pleasant to look at from a distance with its colorful scales, but far too dangerous up close. He grinned. "I was looking at your nose."

Morrigan's scowl lessened to a small frown, and her tone gave away some curiosity. "And what is it about my nose that captivates you so?"

Oh, this was too easy. Either Morrigan was too focused on being uncomfortable among the people around her to recognize his real intent, or baited by talking about her looks. Given how out of place she appeared to be and her tense posture, Alistair thought the former more accurate. "I was just thinking that it looks exactly like your mother's," he said, enjoying how every single one of his words hit their mark.

With a scoff aimed more at the sensation of being caught out than toward him, her expression instantly warped into scorn. "I hate you so much." Next to him, he could feel the questioning gaze of his fellow Warden, though it did little to lessen his amusement.

The conversation Leliana was having with a couple of villagers died down, mainly because a blonde girl of maybe ten years broke away from the throng of people and ran toward Morrigan. "I like your feathers!" When the witch didn't react, the girl added, "On the shoulders of your robe, I mean. They are pretty!"

What happened next was unexpected, and going by the surprised outcry of the people behind him, not only for him. Morrigan looked at her, and smiled. "You think so, little one?"

"Yes." The girl got up on the balls of her feet and gasped. "Are they magic?"

"Perhaps." The witch shrugged, feigning indifference that did not reach her expression. "More important is, however, why you are still in Lothering, little one? Shouldn't you be on your way to safer parts?"

"Because of the darkspawn?" The girl pressed her lips together and nodded. "We will leave. My ma is still busy packing up our wagon for the journey to Denerim."

"Violet!" A middle-aged woman with the same long, blonde hair, braided around her head, pushed through the small throng of onlookers. "I'm sorry she's bothering you," she said to Morrigan, a bit breathless. With her simple clothes, the freckles on her face and tanned skin, she appeared to be one of Lothering's farmers.

"But Maaaa," the girl protested in a way that was typical of kids her age, including a pout. "You said I should go elsewhere until you finished packaging, and now this isn't correct, either?"

The woman gave Morrigan a telltale glance. "Not if you are bothering others that are surely glad to be on their way themselves, Violet!"

"Here." Plucking a long raven feather from her robe, the witch leaned down to hand it to the girl. "'Tis a long and dangerous journey that awaits you, little one. These lands grow dark and will
become darker yet in the days to come. May you stay safe and keep your curiosity about the world."

"It is a good luck charm," Violet beamed, showing the feather to her mother. "Look!"

"Yes." The woman seemed less appreciative of the gift and practically shoved her daughter away from the witch. "Now go help your brother load his belongings, so we can leave soon."

Waiting until Violet was out of sight, she sighed. "I don't mean to appear rude, but -"

"For someone not wanting to appear so, you succeed at it marvelously," Lenya cut into her words and let out a scoff. "Humans, typical."

"What my fellow Warden wanted to say -" Alistair started, but didn't get any further.

Whipping around, she fixed him with a glare. "Do not speak for me, human!"

"Oh right, sorry." He sounded more annoyed than intended, but Maker, he was just trying to help.

"Look, I know you people don't mean any harm..." the woman amended, ignoring their small quarrel. "...but with all that is going on; the lost battle in Ostagar, the approaching darkspawn horde, the Qunari in the cage, it would be better if you left our village. People are already scared enough, y'know? We don't need to draw the ire of the Teyrn on us for hosting Grey Wardens here."

"Wait..." Alistair said, frowning. As much he could sympathize with her fear, there was a particular part in her sentence that drew his attention. "What was that about a Qunari in a cage?"

She seemed taken aback by the question. "You haven't heard, Warden? The Revered Mother ordered he be put in a cage for his crimes, left behind for the darkspawn's arrival."

"Why am I not surprised?" Morrigan spoke up, disdain in her voice. "A man and capable warrior left to be torn by pieces by darkspawn. 'Tis a fine example of the Chantry's mercy, is it not?"

"Capable warrior?" Alistair could practically see the wheels turning in Lenya's head as she stepped toward the farmer. "Where do I find this... Qunari, human?"

"Past my farmland to the east," the woman pointed over her shoulder into the distance. "You can't miss the cage. But you aren't thinking of releasing a murderer, are you?"

Not listening any longer, his fellow Warden already moved into the appointed direction, leaving him no choice but to follow.

Reaching his cage soon after, Lenya stared up at the giant man held within. He was ignoring her, his deep voice reciting what sounded like a prayer in a foreign tongue.


Repeating his prayer another time, the frown etched further into his bronze, weathered skin. Then,
he turned and opened his eyes to look down at her. They had an odd and deep lilac color, contrasting starkly with the white of his long hair. Each of the strands were braided tightly against his skull and bound to a ponytail. "I have nothing to say that will amuse you, elf. Leave me in peace."

Lenya stepped closer still, until her upper body nearly touched the simple metal of his cage. It was barely large enough for his staggering height, not large enough for him to sit down. "What are you?"

Behind her the rattling sound of armor told her that her fellow Warden had finally managed to catch up with her, and with him, the rest of their group.

"A prisoner. I'm in a cage, am I not?" he said, his tone dry. "I've been placed here by the Chantry."

"The Revered Mother said he slaughtered an entire family," the red-headed shem spoke up. Lenya had already forgotten her name and didn't care enough to ask for it. "Even the children!"

"It is as the human tells you," the giant man agreed. "Now leave me in peace. I will not last much longer without food and water."

"Longer?" Lenya cocked her head. "How long have you been in here, then?"

"Twenty days now. It will only take another week, then I will die."

"Wow." Her eyes grew wide. Not only could he probably rip darkspawn to pieces with his massive hands alone, the Qunari also possessed an endurance unheard of for any other race in Thedas. "That is a damn long time without any kind of nourishment."

He scoffed. "Compared to your kind, maybe."

"Why are you so keen on dying, when I could set you free instead?" Crossing her arms, Lenya glared up to him. Sure, he murdered people, even felt guilty for the deed. Yet leaving him rotting to atone for what he'd done seemed such a... waste. "You look as if you have not only seen many battles, but would also prefer to die in one. I can offer you both, if you wish."

At that, Revas barked out and ran toward the distanced farmland past the hills, leaving Lenya to wonder what this was all about.

"Yes. I am Sten of the Beresaad - the vanguard - of the Qunari peoples."

"I'll say," Alistair laughed out but quickly cleared his throat as the Dalish bestowed him with a sour look. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but it is indeed true that qunari are renowned warriors. If we can free him, perhaps he will be able to help us, Lenya."

"To be left here to starve or to be taken by the darkspawn," the chantry shem mused, her lilting voice grating at the headache blooming behind Lenya's skull. "No one deserves that, not even a murderer. We should ask the Revered Mother if she will release him into our custody."

"Yes, you do that, then," Lenya said, waving her off. "I will wait here with our supplies, so we can leave quickly afterwards."

"Aww, not keen on visiting the Chantry then?" The corner of Alistair's lips twitched upwards. As always the damn human was far too observant for his own good. "I can't imagine why you wouldn't spring at the chance to shake the Revered Mother's hand and thank her for all the good
"What has the Revered Mother to do with her people, the Dalish?"

"History, Leliana. History." Her fellow Warden let out a sigh. "I studied it during my templar training, among way too many verses of the Chant." Alistair shuddered. "Have you any idea how many verses there are?" She gave him a look. "Right. Of course you would. As lay sister and all." He started to move, but stopped again to look over his shoulder when the chantry shem didn't follow him. "Shall we go, then?"

"You want to come with me?" she asked, somewhat amused.

"You know I would normally love to spend some more quality time here with Morrigan, but why not have a fun talk about releasing a giant murderer with the Revered Mother instead?" He shrugged with a snort. "Besides, I'm doing you a service, Leliana, because Revered Mothers' just love to yell at me. So while she is doing that, you can use the distraction to steal the key to Sten's cage."

The shem laughed out and patted him on his armored shoulder. "I am sure this won't be necessary, but I appreciate the thought. Come, then." With their departure, much sought silence returned, at last. While the witch remained standing, Lenya sat down on the grassy ground, in between the many packages and bags of their supplies. Peering into the distance, the Dalish savored the stillness for a bit and wondered where her mabari had wandered off to. It wouldn't surprise her if the animal had finally realized what a terrible idea it was to follow her, fighting darkspawn.

"Perhaps we should put Alistair in the cage then, as soon we have freed the Qunari from it," Morrigan said after a while, a scoff in her voice.

Lenya looked up at Morrigan and arched an eyebrow. "You would like that, huh?"

She crossed her arms and looked down at her. "Hm, and you would not?"

"Don't get me wrong, Morrigan. I'm terribly fascinated by the stupid rivalry you both have going on, ever since meeting each other." Lenya paused for effect. "However, leave me out of it. I have enough trouble on my own."

Huffing, she glanced away. "Obviously."

Both fell into a silence again, one that lingered and stretched without anyone interrupting it with useless words. It felt far easier and natural to do so in the company of the witch than with her fellow Warden. In fact, Alistair struggled to not speak for even five whole minutes, unfortunately.

"On the other hand, it would be much more quiet without the talkative, annoying human," Lenya said, the humor in her voice quickly traded in for a groan. "Alas, he is also the only other Grey Warden besides me, so I doubt it will be a feasible option."

"You are a Grey Warden then?" Sten spoke up from behind her, halting whatever Morrigan was about to say.

"Not by choice, mind you, giant friend." She turned around to him, frowning. "Why are you asking?"

"My people have heard legends of the Grey Wardens' strength and skill." He paused to look her up and down with a snort. "Though I suppose not every legend is true."
Before Lenya had time to feel offended upon his comment, Revas reappeared in the distance from behind the hills. The silvery object he carried was way too large for his muzzle, which didn't stop him from dragging it after him nonetheless. Seeing his mistress, the hound adapted a quicker trot, while stubbornly holding onto the item with his teeth. As he approached, Lenya saw that it was a weapon; a greatsword to be exact. Revas reached her soon after and spat it out at her feet. Panting, he looked up at her as he waited for her reaction, most likely praise. For a brief moment, Lenya was unable to give him either.

"I think... my Mabari has found a weapon for you, Qunari." Revas barked in agreement. "I hope you like using greatswords."

The Qunari only let out a noncommittal grunt, while eyeing the weapon like he had done with her before. "It has to suffice, small as it is."

Petting Revas for his deed done, Lenya observed the weapon in front of her. Its long blade was crusted in dried blood and it was easily as large in height as herself. Well, to be honest, if you were as large as the Qunari, everything would be appear small to yourself. She noticed how Revas tensed underneath her palm, heard him growling, while observing how the shadows of six figures grew larger on the ground. Lenya's head snapped up to see a group of men, all clad in simple clothes instead of armor, approaching her.

"We done heard what was said. You're a Warden," a shaggy human stated, while pointing an iron dagger at her. His hand was shaking a bit.

She jumped to her feet, alarmed. "What? Did you glean that from the griffon emblazoned on my armor? Wow, such an eye for details, amazing."

Morrigan gripped her staff and brought herself into position. "I don't think these fools are here to banter, Lenya," she sneered.

"No..." Her gaze wandered from one shemlen to another, noticing their mismatched weapons and stained clothes. These were no bandits, nor warriors but simple, untrained farmers. "It seems these shemlen are here for the bounty on my head."

The man nodded and held his chin up high as he glared down at her. "I don't know if you killed King Cailan, and Maker forgive me, I don't care. But that bounty on your head could feed a lot of hungry bellies."

The other men approached even closer, effectively cutting off any escape route for them. Revas reacted to the increased proximity by baring his large fangs, ready to attack any moment. Despite their advantage in number, fighting them would be a quick and gory affair Lenya would prefer to avoid. She wouldn't hinder these dimwitted lambs running headlong into their own slaughter if they were so keen on throwing their lives away, yet it all seemed so... pointless. "Look around you, shem'allas. Do you seriously think you fools have any chance of winning this fight?" She drew her blades and readied herself, just in case. The energy of Morrigan's magic crackled upon her skin, as the witch conjured up a small electric current and flung it at the feet of two farmer opposite, deliberately missing them. They jumped back and shrieked out in terror, causing her to chuckle.

"If you value your pathetic life, 'twould be better if you listen to her. I care not."

Lenya noticed a small shift in mood, a bit of hesitance that wasn't there before. Glaring at them, she huffed out. "So what is it going to be, assholes?"

The shaggy human stormed forward to attack her, replying to her question without words.
"Soooo," Leliana drawled out, turning to him. "Your fellow Warden?"

"Yeeees?" Alistair replied in the same drawn out way. Two could play the game. "What about her?"

"Is she always so..." She waved her hands as she searched for fitting and probably not insulting words. "...distant? Cold?"

"What?" He laughed out. "Are you disappointed that Lenya hasn't offered to braid your hair yet? Sorry to say, but I don't think... that will happen. Ever."

They took another turn past the tavern and had almost reached the Chantry. "No. I rather think she hates me," Leliana said after a short pause.

"Don't take it personally, but she doesn't like anyone. Except for the dog, maybe."

She frowned at him. "Not even you?"

"Especially not me," he said, snorting. "You know... the human thing? Lenya isn't keen about that. At all. Besides she likes to keep to herself and since I like to be alive, I try to respect that." Alistair's mouth quirked up, into a lopsided grin. "She can be really scary, after all."

"Oh..." Looking at him with widened eyes, Leliana flashed him a smile. The kind that made him want to turn around, to run and hide.

The Chantry's entrance suddenly seemed miles away. "What?"

Her smile widened. "You... like her."

Alistair stopped a half pace ahead of her and turned back, to stare at her as if she'd lost her mind. She probably had. "No!" Maker, he could feel himself blushing, which wasn't exactly helping his case right now. "Why is everyone..." Halting his words he released his breath as a frustrated sigh. "I... hardly even know her! Same for you, I guess. So I don't know why we are even discussing this."

"Sorry..." She grimaced. "I didn't mean to pry or assume anything."

"Yes, well, a little late for that," he said, sounding more harsh than he meant to be. After all, it had been just light hearted banter, but for some reason it got under his skin. "Look, just because she is my fellow Warden doesn't mean we get along, let alone are destined to be together. As I told you before, she isn't, nor am I, here by choice." Frowning, he shook his head slightly. "This isn't one of your ballads or stories, Leliana. ...Whatever they are."

"You are right," she amended with a sigh. "However I have my lute now, so I can perform one of my songs or tales for you the next time we make camp, if you like."

Alistair chuckled. "Alright. As long you don't expect me to pay for it, as the last of our money went into a better, Lenya-approved bow."

"Nah," Leliana said with a giggle, while gearing toward the Chantry's door. "See it as included
service for taking me along, as long you don't expect -"

"The evil shall descend upon us!" a dark-skinned Chasind man started to scream, interrupting her words. Clad in crude leather armor, he had a giant axe strapped on his back and marched up and down in front of the scared onlooker. "The legions of evil are on your doorstep! They will feast upon our hearts!" His voice grew even louder, adapted a despaired, near crazed edge. The people around him gasped out in fear, a child began to cry. "There is nowhere to run! This evil will cover the world, like a plague of locusts!"

Then his dark eyes fixed Alistair and with his finger, he pointed at him. "There! One of their darkspawn's minions is already among us!" Alistair rolled his eyes. Great, he seemed to be attracting crazy today, even if Leliana turned out to be pretty okay.

"Go on without me." He motioned her to leave. "I'll handle this."

She hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Yup. I'm kind of interested in how that guy knows that I'm a Warden, armor aside." Alistair gave her a shrug. "And crazy or not, he seems easier to deal with than a Revered Mother, to be honest."

"Wait for me here, then?" Leliana asked, and he nodded to show her it was okay. He could handle Lenya--well, somewhat--so that guy would be nothing in comparison. "I'll be back as soon as possible." She turned to leave but stopped half a pace ahead again to look back over her shoulder. "And don't get hit by that axe."

"Generally always good advice, but thanks."

Using Alistair's moment of distraction, the Chasind closed in on him. "This man bears their evil stench. Can you not see the vile blackness that fills him?"

"Excuse me?" Alistair gasped out in fake shock as he stood his ground. He was half a head taller than the man, which made the last part a bit easier. "I bathe regularly, thank you very much!"

"I watched the black horde descend upon my people!" the man cried out and fell to his knees, forcing Alistair to step back from him. "Darkness swallowed the marshes whole and..." His voice cracking, he pointed at the Warden again. "This minion is but the first of those who will destroy us!"

The urge to knock the loony out cold was growing in him by the minute. However, the screaming of the man had attracted many onlookers, so punching him wouldn't be the best solution. Alistair didn't want to further worsen the reputation of the Grey Wardens, not with the bounty already placed on their heads. So he settled for another, much used weapon of his: Words. Folding his arms, he looked down at him. "Interesting party trick, screaming like that. Way too much doom and gloom for my taste, though. Can you not do, I don't know, literally anything else? How about using this big axe on the darkspawn you hate so much? That would help."

The Chasind sprang back to his feet and narrowed his eyes on the Warden. "Are you calling me a coward?"

"I'm calling you an idiot, more like," Alistair shook his head and huffed. "I mean just listen to yourself for a minute. I get that you are scared, but you are helping nobody here with your shouting. In fact, you are only making it worse."

"You...," He paused to stifle a sob, yet it broke through his words nonetheless. "I have shamed my ancestors. But the blackness will come!" Whipping around, the man gave chase into the opposite
direction, toward Lothering's entrance. Good, everything would be better with him finally gone.

"He was right, wasn't he?" said a near-bald man, clad in a chantry robe. "There is no hope for us."

Or... not. "There is always hope, dear Brother," Alistair replied and tried to at least sound optimistic, even if he wasn't feeling it. "Muster your courage."

"You are right!" The Chantry Brother nodded. "We can't give up yet."

"Yes," another man agreed. "We can't simply lie down and wait for our death here. We must go north, to Denerim."

"Thank you, Warden," the Brother said. "May the Maker be with you." After that, the group of onlookers slowly dispersed. And with them, some of the small wagons that previously had blocked the sight of the Chantry's humble flowerbed. It was largely overgrown with weeds; he spotted some elfroot among them, but approaching further toward it, Alistair also saw a rosebush.

Being left as untended as the flowerbed was, it didn't surprise him to find it dead. Its thorny branches were twisted; gray in color and gnarled. Yet at the side of it, there was a single white rose sticking out from the otherwise withered bush, and the odd contrast between life and death drew him in further. Leaning over the flower, Alistair observed its pearly-white petals for a brief moment. It was beautiful and strong, defying all the death around itself.

He should probably leave it alone, but the darkspawn would come and destroy it and... Before he knew it, his gloved hand reached out for the rose's green stem and plucked it from the gnarled bush. Now in his hands, Alistair was briefly unsure what to do with the rose. The belt bag of his armor wasn't exactly equipped to carry such a delicate floral item, but the voice calling out for him overrode any caution regarding it.

"Alistair?" It was Leliana, returned from her meeting with the Revered Mother. "Did you not hear me?"

Rushing to stow the flower away in his small bag, he turned around to her. "Sorry, I was lost in thoughts, I guess."

Leliana frowned, her teeth grazing her lower lip as if doubting his small lie. She held a large bundle of fabric in both of her hands. "I see you have managed to clear the air without bloodshed."

I'm not Lenya. Even if meant humorously, the thought was too cruel to articulate. So he settled for pointing at the object held within her arms instead. "So did you, I suppose. Unless that inside the bundle is -"

"Sten's armor, yes." Leliana pursed her lips, thankfully interrupting his ill-suited attempt at humor. "The Revered Mother has released him into my... our custody, and they still had his armor stored away. What did you think?"

"Nothing." Alistair averted his eyes and a faint blush spread across his brown cheeks. Where did these dark thoughts even came from? Maybe it was the rose which awoke the realization within how frail the peace here was and what would soon happen with this village and its people. The darkspawn would come razing, murdering, tearing everything apart like they did in--

"Alistair!" Her voice was brisk, cutting through the unbidden images assaulting him. "Are you spacing out again?"

"Sorry." He laughed out, its sound fake, too forced, while blinking rapidly. "What will happen to
all those people we leave behind in here Lothering?" His need to talk it through superseded the one longing for ignorance, to close his eyes and plug his ears.

"Some of them will find their way to Denerim. Many will die. As the Maker wills." The large bundle hung low and heavy in her arms. Alistair gestured toward it, but Leliana negated his request to carry the armor with a shake of her head, and motioned him to follow. Slowly they moved away from the Chantry's entrance, back toward the east area of the village. "If the Blight isn't stopped, everyone will die. This is the greater good we're serving, both of us, and your fellow Warden."

His mouth snapped open as he stared at her. How could she talk so nonchalantly about it all, with so many lives on the line? "So it's all right to let some people die for the greater good?" Alistair shook his head. "I... I'm not so sure about that. I feel bad for leaving all those helpless people here behind to their impending slaughter."

Glancing up at him, Leliana sighed, but didn't slow her steps. "You're doing what you must, Alistair. There will be worse to come yet, and you will need to steel yourself for it."

Walking over the arcing stone bridge with the small stream purling underneath, they cut around the corner, past the windmills at each side. "I've never been very good at that. The steeling myself part, I mean." He paused to gather his thoughts, to find the right words. "I think it is better sometimes to just be a little weak. I'm alright with that, really."

"I don't believe you," she replied curtly, eyes straight ahead. "And either way -" Gasping out, the heavy bundle of armor landed with a dull thud on the ground. Frozen in place, Leliana stared past Sten's cage in the near distance.

Several villagers lay motionless on the ground, their blood tinting the grass underneath crimson. Alistair's stomach churned as he fell into a jog to approach them quickly, and the group standing in between them. Leliana followed close behind, as he made a beeline for his fellow Warden. Her blades still in hands and bloodied all over, there was no doubt that Lenya was responsible for this massacre. Rage rose like a heatwave inside and burst out of him in sharp, loud words. "What have you done?" He gripped her arm to turn her around, to make her look at him. "I leave you alone for half an hour and you go about murdering innocent villagers?"

Her eyes grew hard, as she yanked her arm free from his grasp. She uttered something in a foreign tongue, but didn't reply to him.

"Innocent, pah." It was the witch, who scoffed. With her arms crossed, she stood nearby, leaning on the stone wall behind her. "Tis typical that you, simpleton, would jump to this conclusion, instead of looking closer."

"Oh really?" Alistair spat, head turning back to glare at Lenya. "What have these humans done to you then? Looked at you wrong?"

She didn't back down from his challenge but met his glare and ire with her own. The blades rattled in her hands as she shook, her whole body tense. Lenya pursed her lips to a sneer as she leaned in. "Fuck you, shem!" A hint of hurt flashed across her expression before she whirled around and stomped away. Or maybe it had only been his imagination. Seeing her leave, Revas let go off the bloodied chunk of... meat he was chewing on and huffed as he passed Alistair.

Behind him, the Qunari groaned out. "Parshaara, they were attacked and just defended themselves. As they should."

Alistair turned around to the giant man. "Who attacked whom?"
"The humans attacked the elf. Are you dumb in addition to blind, Warden?"

Morrigan laughed. "Oh, I already like you, Sten."

"He is right," Leliana said, while hovering over one of the villager's corpses. She looked up at him and held up a simple dagger found next to the body. "They were armed. Badly so, but still armed."

_Oh crap._ Alistair's eyes flitted toward Lenya who had put some distance between herself and them, but did not completely vanish from sight. It was more than he deserved, really. His eyes fixed on Morrigan again. "What happened here?"

"Oh, _now_ you are asking?" A smirk played around her lips. "Bit late, 'tis it not?"

The sinking feeling spread within his guts, along with the certainty that he had made a mistake. "Just tell me!" he snapped at the witch, harsher than needed or intended.

"I think they were here for the bounty the Teyrn put on your heads," Leliana replied in her stead and wiped her bloodstained hands against her leather armor. "These people were desperate, needed the money, and saw a chance. Still..." She paused with a frown. "... I'm not sure if such excessive force was needed to fend them off. These were simple farmers, no bandits."

"She warned them," Morrigan huffed, meaning Lenya. "These fools did not listen and ran into their own slaughter, like sheeps." Gathering her own small bundle of belongings from the ground and shouldering her staff, the witch left, heading in Lenya's direction.

"Great," Alistair breathed out. In one single moment he'd destroyed every bit of progress made with his fellow Warden the past days, however small. "I'm an idiot."

"Yes. Finally we agree on something."

He threw Sten a look for the dry remark. "But I'm still an idiot with the key to your cage."

Or more like Leliana was. Having reclaimed the bundle with the Qunari's armor, she stepped in front of his cage. Fumbling with the key a bit, she finally managed to turn the rusty lock. The cage’s hinges creaked as she opened its large door, but the Qunari remained rooted on the spot. "Am I to follow you into battle?" he asked, his lilac eyes narrowing. "It seems more likely that you should follow me, whelp."

Alistair bit down a groan. Fantastic, he had just excelled in making a lasting impression on everyone today. Alas not in a good way. "Yes, well," he said all too quickly, shouldeing three of the large bundles. "How about I start with following you _out_ of this village then? I'm sure your redemption lies somewhere beyond it."

Alistair peered up the large stone bridge, toward the village's edge where Lenya lingered, and sighed. Regarding himself however, he wasn't quite so certain that redemption was an option.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

Complete rewrite and deletion of the old version. Shifted the focus to the two Wardens and their interpersonal relationships (and their failing in them) Added and novelized
the feather gift scene of Morrigan to find in WoT2. It is a much more personal chapter now for all characters, instead of a rehash of the events there.

Kudos and especially comments are most appreciated. Let me know what you think :)
Anger Management

Chapter Notes

This is a character/introspective heavy in between camp chapter. Please regard that I often reference and speak of a RL song in this chapter (The Willow Maid by Erutan) that I have contextualized and re-purposed for the story. Listen to it/knowing it before/while reading, will help you understand the second part better :)

All the gratitude in the world to my busy but super awesome beta Liisa (heffalumps.) I love you tons for fixing my grammar mess.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fire poured through her veins - ripping, burning. Under a blood-red sky, jarring flashes of a massive darkspawn horde appeared before her eyes. Above them all towered a behemoth of a crimson dragon. It roared, its echo reverberating through her marrow and bones. Panic gripped Lenya as the creature fixed her with its eyes, black as coal, its screeching voice scratching at the back of her skull. It saw her, it spoke to her, and she needed to get away, to escape its grasp before -

With a scream, Lenya jolted awake. Frantic for air, for anything that was real, she gasped, while the dragon's purple flames still flickered in front of her eyes, bright and burning.

"Bad dreams, huh?"

His voice reached her in between her shudders, an anchor she could cling to to return to reality. Blinking once, twice, Lenya slowly willed the pictures in her mind away until only their camp was left. The ground beneath her rough-spun bedroll was cold and hard - but solid. Another anchor. The flames of their fire pricked her skin with their warmth. The all-consuming blaze within her nightmare had become an orange-red glow of comfort. It was no longer threatening - instead, it was safe.

Revas whined at her distress, and her hands reached out to tangle in his coarse fur. Lenya pressed her eyes shut again, and, still trembling, she let her head follow as she embraced her hound for solace. The mabari didn't move except to put his large head upon her shoulder; it was a welcome weight. He was warm and reeked of coppery blood, dust and the musk of wild animal. It was a smell similar to that of the animals she hunted and stripped bare for their pelt, back when she was still with her clan - back in another life. Her shudder turned into a dry-heaved sob, and her arms squeezed tighter around her dog's muscular body, holding on.

"Hey..." She heard his voice again, more grating now that it had gained a worried edge. "Are you okay?"

No, no she was not. Lenya doubted she ever would be again. "I'm fine," she snapped between clenched teeth and fists. With the pictures of her nightmare fading, the hot, lingering remembrance of the hours before stabbed her chest; of his foolishness and the accusations that had been made. It bubbled up from her guts to her throat, fueling the frustration already there. "Don't bother me," she added with the same sharpness. Her eyes, despite being open again, weren't looking at him. Instead, Lenya kept them trained on the flickering light of the flames and Revas' tawny coat.
"Stupid human.

"It's just that you were shouting in your sleep. Loudly. And not in a good, this-is-private way, either," Alistair amended, biting back a groan. He sat close by the campfire, hovering just outside of her peripheral vision. Even if she couldn’t see him, her blood sung with his presence, bright as a swarm of fireflies in a murky forest. This was new - and maddening, and unwelcome. Her fingers, already bunched into fists in Revas's fur, clenched tighter in the futile search for control.

His stifled groan of frustration returned as a sigh. "You see, part of being a Grey Warden is being able to hear the darkspawn. The archdemon, it... talks to the horde, and we feel it just as they do," he explained, and it took her everything to not scream, at him and his words, at what she had become: a slave to their hivemind, a tainted beast in all but name. "That was what your dream was, Lenya. That's why we know this is really a Blight."

She hated how calm he was about it all, and how she had no choice in any of it. Yet again. "Are these dreams going to happen a lot?" she asked, her voice far too quiet for all the rage it hid.

"It depends," he said, adopting the same quiet tone. The sympathy in it churned in her stomach, unwelcome as his presence, which was still invading her senses. "It is harder during a Blight, but you will learn to block them out. The older Wardens say..." His breath hitched. "... said they could understand a bit of what the archdemon says. I sure cannot, as I've been a Warden for only six months too and - " Alistair swallowed his remaining words. "Anyway..." He cleared his throat. "... I just wanted to tell you about this after I saw you thrashing about in your sleep here. It was also scary for me at first."

Her head snapped up to look at him at last. "You should have told me about this earlier!" The accusation wasn't fair, but neither had he been back in Lothering - and she was still angry about that, too.

"Stupid human.

"Yes, well..." The words came out a hiss, as biting as poison, while his eyes narrowed. "I've just been so distracted with the, you know, massacre of all my friends and the war and all that... sorry."

Lenya didn't back down, furious and the tiniest bit petulant. She'd have continued for hours if something hadn't whooshed past her vision and then appeared in front of her. It was the red-headed chantry shem she felt even less sympathy for than her fellow Warden, especially right now.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, picking up on the tension between them. "If this is about what happened in Lother-"

"No, it is not," Lenya snapped and was on her feet in one motion. Taut as a drawn bowstring, she trembled, shifting her glare to the woman. Then, she turned and stalked away before giving in to her rage, her thirst for violence.

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Revas followed her, because of course he did, to somewhere these idiot-humans were not.

Having stopped within an hour of leaving that shem village, there were no trees on the side of the road she could vanish into for the rest of the night. There was not much of anything here to hide and curl up in. It was just her and her rage, caged in this flat terrain. The wide openness of it was
treacherous, promising a freedom that didn't exist - not for her. Huffing, Lenya picked up a pebble from the ground to hurl it at the horizon that mocked her.

"Feeling better now?" a voice scoffed behind her, bearing a cool annoyance typical of the witch. She turned around only to recognize that she’d half-blundered into Morrigan's separate camp.

"No," Lenya admitted, chewing her lip, and scowled at her.

"Thought so," she huffed and settled back down at her own small campfire, oozing disapproval.

"Mind if I sit down?" Lenya thought about vanishing, seeking solitude in the terrain's wideness. Morrigan was the next best thing to that, her company more tolerable than the idiot screaming within her blood. His presence was still there, all around her, but the distance, however little, helped to subdue it.

Morrigan's eyes were keen upon hers, and then they narrowed slightly. "Only if you are not done hurling stones at the sky like a fool."

"I am... done." The admission was brittle and sounded a bit tired, because that was what she was. The nightmare had destroyed what little rest she had and any hope of further sleep with it. Before this, in another life, Lenya had enjoyed sleeping, tucked away in the safety of her araval or under the blanket of stars with soft grass underneath her. Overhead, the stars were hidden behind a thick tapestry of clouds. Fitting somehow - even this small thing had been stolen from her, like too much else already.

Morrigan continued to grind herbs into a paste, blissfully ignorant of her presence. She didn't speak, nor did she expect her to. It was perfect, silent companionship without the pressure of having to bare her soul to the witch, to justify her reasons and anger. The stillness between them lingered until Revas pushed past her and made a beeline toward Morrigan's open pack next to her. The wagging of his stump tail and a telltale crunch made it obvious that he'd found what he was looking for. Rooting through the satchel, the dog sniffed for more treats within, while the witch slowly but surely approached a dangerous shade of red.

"Revas!" Lenya urged him back, if only to keep Morrigan from turning him into an ice figure. He stiffened upon hearing his name and, with a low, plaintive whine, backed away. Instead of feeling guilty as he had first insinuated, the dog looked at his mistress with a doggy grin. Lenya tried really, really hard not to laugh. Smug bastard.

The witch was somehow less amused by the situation. "Ugh, can't you even keep your flea-ridden mongrel under control, Lenya?"

"Sorry?" she offered with a shrug, "but he isn't exactly mine, you know? He only chose to follow me." Revas barked eagerly in agreement.

"Obviously..." Morrigan gave the hound a withering look, and he had the grace to at least appear ashamed. "... he chose not to follow just now."

Lenya shrugged again. "Well... when there is food, all imprinting on me seems to cease existing."

"You just ate my entire bag of herbs, you foolish dog," the witch said to Revas with a scoff, and he whined. "Several of those herbs were poisonous. If they kill you, 'tis entirely your fault for being so gluttonous."

"Wait... hold that thought." Lenya would have been more worried about Revas if she hadn't already seen him gnawing on too many other things and surviving. A small smile bloomed across
her face despite her sour mood. The implication of it was just too good for her to not be amused by it. "Herbs aren't crunchy. Did you buy treats for Revas?"

"Do not be ridiculous!" Morrigan scoffed, but a faint dusting of pink appeared on her pale cheeks. "I did no such thing!"

"Hey, I'm just saying, if my dog ends up poisoned, I will blame you," she drawled, teasing. "Since you stored them in your herb satchel."

"The idiot of a shopkeeper gave them to me for free when I bought my stash of herbs, said he saw me with a mabari." Morrigan crossed her arms and did her best to stay defiant. "I forgot they were still there."

Lenya laughed, not believing her one bit. "Sure, sure. Because the shemlen in that village were so forthcoming to strangers..."

"I do not need to justify my actions to you, Lenya," she said, glaring. Revas cocked his head and looked at the witch with a small boof that indicated he wanted more treats. She shifted her gaze to him. "I am certainly not going to give you more, even if I did have more to give, you foolish beast."

The dog sagged dramatically to the ground with a pitiful whine. "Perhaps you should go and hunt something, then. For a warrior beast you are remarkably over-dependent."

"Should I leave you two alone to discuss this?"

Morrigan threw her another look for that comment. "Maybe you should just leave and return to your little circle of idiots over there." She pointed toward the main camp, where both humans still sat at the campfire.

"In case you still haven't noticed, that is exactly what I am trying to get away from," Lenya said. "You are easier to be around, since you don't judge me..." The witch huffed. "... much. His - their - scrutiny... is maddening." She sighed, rubbing her face as her exhaustion settled deeper. "Sorry about the herbs. I can give you some from my stash, if you want."

"I'd prefer it if we stopped by another village soon instead." She frowned into the half-paste of herbs on her lap. "Given its situation, Lothering didn't offer much, and there is still much we need for our travels."

"Like new treats for Revas?" The dog perked up and gave a soft, agreeing woof. "Just kidding," she quickly amended, catching sight of the witch’s glare. "I know what you mean. We still lack tents for half of us, clothes and cooking equipment. You know, small things like that. Herbs will be getting harder to find in a few weeks, too, with winter approaching. So it would be wise to stock up on them now." She cocked her head. "Do you have anywhere in mind? As you might have noticed, I am not particularly knowledgeable when it comes to shemlen villages."

"But I am?" Morrigan scoffed, though relented soon after. "Merinwood. 'Tis another small insignificant dot on the map, but 'tis further out west from here, and thus not in the path of the darkspawn horde. 'Tis likely that we could find the remaining supplies we need there."

"Hmm," Lenya hummed, suppressing a yawn. "Then Merinwood it is. I value your input, Morrigan. You speak with purpose, not because you need to fill silence. Nor do you accuse me of shit I obviously haven't done."

"If this is about your fool of a fellow Warden, I am not interested."

Lenya glanced over to the separated campfire in the distance, the frustration dancing upon her
tongue like a bitter herb concoction. "Yeah, me neither." She looked back at the witch. "Let's talk about you instead." Anything to keep her distracted from these pictures still so present in her mind and the invasive buzzing of that human inside of her whole being. "Have you been out of the Wilds often?"

"So... full of questions, are you?" Morrigan sighed, yet set aside her mortar and pestle to reply in earnest. "From time to time, perhaps. A world full of people and buildings and things was all very foreign to me, but I have been to the closeby villages, watched the people and pondered what curious beings they are," she said, yellow eyes straying into the distance. "There I spoke with men, a little. There they stared and knew me to be an outsider. On occasion, I purchased goods from the village merchants." Her eyes settled back on the Dalish. "Mother wished for me to expand the horizon of my experience beyond the Wilds. Even she was not born here."

"Asha'belannar..." Lenya breathed, the witches' deceptively frail appearance with its raw power thrumming underneath still fresh in her mind. "She seems to have a plan for everything and everyone, doesn't she?" She couldn't leave the bitterness out of her voice. She could still feel it lingering deep within her, the bitterness of being roped into this by the old woman and her guilt trip. "I know you are not here by choice either - not exactly. So... what do you want, Morrigan?"

"What I want..." The witch blinked and surprise crossed her features. "No one ever asked..." She stopped mid-sentence and pressed her lips together - the admission was too much, too personal. "What I want is to see the mountains. I wish to witness the oceans and step into their waters. I want to experience a city rather than just see it in my mind." She tilted her head. "So... yes. This is what I want."

Lenya smiled, but her throat and heart constricted too much to keep it up for long. "That does sound lovely, indeed," she said, her voice quiet. "Might as well do that while we run about the country for this fool's errand your mother has set us both on."

"That implies a lack of choice." Morrigan frowned at her. "You could have left to run after your clan, and I wouldn't have faulted you for doing so. Yet you chose to stay..."

"Yeah..." Lenya shrunk back a bit, her anger drowned out by resignation like a flame extinguished. Her fingers gripped a fistful of Revas's fur, making him whine with worry. "Maybe that makes both of us Wardens fools, then."

"No." The witch shook her head, and her eyebrows drew together even more. "'Tis not what I think you are."

That remains to be seen, Lenya thought. "Thank you," she said instead and settled back into easy silence.

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Alistair looked over to his fellow Warden and frowned. An hour ago, she had been storming away in a huff, and now she sat at the campfire again as if nothing had happened. It gave him a peace of mind to see her return, but it changed little between them. Silent and not acknowledging him in the slightest, Lenya focused on cutting the bear meat into smaller slices for drying and smoking over the fire. He sighed, the sound mixing in with the methodical scraping of her skinning knife.

"Can I help you?" The answer to his question was apparent in the way her shoulders stiffened, but the urge to ask overruled the expected result nonetheless. Ever since the incident in Lothering,
where he had stupidly accused her of killing these farmers, it was back to square one with Lenya. Well, she did kill them, but it hadn't been without provocation, like he'd thought - and told her. Even all the apologies he'd made while setting up their sparse camp had been met with cool ignorance and a perpetual scowl. Her fingers curled tighter around the knife's handle, her knuckles turning near white. Lenya chose evasion instead of confrontation and turned her back on him fully. Alistair stifled another sigh, not wanting to push his luck. The heavy footfalls behind him belonged to Sten, who made his patrolling rounds under a starless, blackened sky. Overall, the night would have been peaceful, nearly serene, even, were it not for the conflict with his fellow Warden gnawing at his insides.

A bit later, Leliana re-emerged from her small tent on the far left side of camp, a smile on her lips and her lute in her hands. Bright red hair ruffled from her nap, she walked toward him. "I think I still owe you a song or tale, Alistair."

"You... do?"

She sat down in the grass next to him, positioning herself so that she could survey the rest of their modest camp as if it were her stage. Crossing her legs, Leliana placed the lute in her lap and strummed it a couple of times to tune it. She looked up at him. "Yes, I promised you I’d perform one in Lothering. Now that I have rested a little, I'm making good on that promise. Any particular wishes?"

Alistair blinked. "No? I mean, you are the expert here, so I leave it to you."

"Good." Her smile widened. "Then how about a tale in a song? Each song tells a story, yes, but especially this one." Turning her head, she glanced over to Lenya, who still was concentrating on her meat preservation process. "You may like it too, Lenya, for it has its origin with the Dalish. It is called "The Willow Maid.""

Alistair saw a new stiffening of his fellow Warden's back at that, even more than after he had offered his help. As taciturn as she was, he'd quickly learned to pick up on her non-verbal cues. "I don't think this is a goo-" he tried to say to Leliana, but the first notes of her lute cut him off as she started to play in earnest.

Soon, Leliana's crystal clear voice filled the chill of night. Even Sten stopped his rounds to listen. The lyrics spun a tale of a young man coming across the aforementioned willow maid in a forest, falling in love with her, and trying to persuade her to leave with him to become his bride. Leliana's voice carried the right amount of longing and wistfulness, speaking of unrequited love as the man returned to the maid again and again, despite being rejected each time.

"See me now
A ray of light in the moondance
See me now
I cannot leave this place
Hear me now
A strain of song in the forest
Don't ask me
To follow where you lead"

Alistair huffed under his breath. That guy in the tale was obviously a bit too much of a jerk,
refusing to take her no for an answer. Not only that, but he was outright disregarding her wishes and pleas, to the point of coming to the forest one day to fell the willow tree she lived in. He suppressed a roll of his eyes as Leliana's voice carried the song's lyrics over the edges of their camp.

Riiiiight, *that* would certainly win her over.

*The maiden wept when she heard him*
*When he said he'd set her free*
*He took his axe and used it*
*To bring down her ancient tree*
*"Now your willow's fallen*
*Now you belong to me"

Yeah, the man's entitlement wasn't *creepy* at all. Alistair shifted in place, becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the male character while his sympathy for the titular maid grew. She never wanted any of this to happen to her and had voiced it so many times. But the maid was given no choice, her home and place to belong robbed from her, and *- oh*. His eyes flicked over to Lenya, who had ceased all movement, except for a slight tremble of her shoulders. She stared ahead into the flames of the campfire, her posture tense. Did Leliana... no, she couldn't have known about the parallels when choosing that song. Alistair swallowed, his throat suddenly too tight. Impossible.

*She followed him out the forest*
*And collapsed upon the earth*
*Her feet had walked but a distance*
*From the green land of her birth*

He should look away. Any moment now, Lenya would notice his stare and whirl around to yell at him to stop - but nothing of the sort happened. Instead, her shoulders only sagged a little, as if she were giving up an internal battle. Alistair wasn't stupid. He very much pretended to be, sometimes even believed it himself, but if he recognized the parallels in these lyrics, so would she. Maybe even more quickly than he had. He couldn't see her face, only the strained curl of her hand around the knife's handle, holding on to the last threads of her stubbornness.

*She faded into a flower*
*That would bloom for one bright eve*
*He could not take from the forest*
*What was never meant to leave*

Her figure blurred before his eyes right as the last word of Leliana's song hung in the air. Alistair blinked once, twice, allowing himself the luxury of keeping his eyes closed and drawing in a shaky breath. A single trail of tears escaped, burning down his cheeks. It wasn't fair - none of it was. Why did the maid have to die, and why was he so affected by a simple song? *You know why*, the annoying voice in his head told him. "Yeah," he agreed, breathing out the word nigh audibly. When he reopened his eyes, Lenya's spot was empty. His gaze shifted to Leliana, who was peering in the direction his fellow Warden must have run off to, yet again.

"Oh," she uttered, lowering her lute and placing it on the ground. "I... had no idea."
His eyebrows drew together. "About what?"

Leliana blinked quickly, then turned to look at him. "That she is hurting." She exhaled. "It all makes more sense now."

"It does?" he asked, a bit puzzled by her words.

"Her standoffish behavior, yes," the bard explained, nodding. "Sometimes music reaches where words cannot." And, not missing a beat, she added, "You should go after her."

"What? No no no, bad idea. Very bad." He laughed, but the sound lacked any humor. "Remember, I'm not exactly in Lenya's good graces right now, due to my brilliant conclusion in Lothering."

"She is your fellow Warden..." Leliana stated, using just enough of a guilt-inducing edge in her voice to give her words more weight than his own.

"Yes, one I hardly know, for that matter." Alistair hated the bitterness in his tone, the awareness of having lost the argument before it even started. He got up, though not without bestowing a defiant glower upon Leliana. "Fine. I'll go. But if I don't return, the Blight is your problem to handle."

She chuckled, looking far too pleased with herself. "Deal."

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Finding Lenya was easy, the taint in her blood a beacon under a starless sky. The even terrain didn't give her much possibility to slip away, either, unlike the forest they had camped in a couple days ago. Alistair didn't expect to find her like this, though. Sunken into herself, she sat with her back pressed into a crevice in the rocks around them. Her long hair was no longer bound back, and it spread out over her shoulders and face, a shield from the world. She inhaled, shaking a bit with every breath of air.

Alistair stopped in his tracks, frowning at the miserable figure. Should he proceed and intrude upon her space, like the jerk in the song did? Would she even accept his solace, or was it something he was doing for his own sake, to feel better and to calm Leliana down? Knowing he had been pushed into following her, the answer to these self-imposed questions seemed clear-cut.

"What do you want?" The rawness in her voice undid all his thoughts to turn around and leave her be. Given her furious stare, heightened by the gleam of light reflecting in her eyes, it would probably have been the better choice. But he simply couldn't do that, not while she was hurting like this - like he did for the loss of his home and family. No one deserved that, but Alistair doubted his ability to make it better. How would he be able to do it for others, if he couldn't even comfort himself?

"I-" He licked his lips and tilted his head a bit. "Were you crying?"

"No!" Lenya snapped, blinking away the telltale wetness lingering in her eyes. "Stupid song. Stupid chantry shem..." she muttered, more to herself than to him, yet loudly enough to be comprehensible.

Ah. Of course. He took another step in her direction, closing the distance between them until his hand touched the surface of her rock-made-refuge. "It is okay to cry, you know?" he offered, because there was nothing else he had to offer, lingering awkwardly between towering over her and
trying not to.

"I don't need your permission, shem!" Her sharp annoyance added to the rawness of her tone, and he had to suppress the need to flinch. Alistair raised a hand to placate her, needing to let the other rest upon the solid stone for his own stability. Maybe this was the reason why she sat here in the crevice instead of out in the open - to ground herself.

"No, of course not," he amended, his voice as calm as his motions. He inhaled deeply, and the taste of wood smoke and dried grass lingered upon his tongue. To connect with a person, showing her that you understood, was difficult, even more so when the said person refused to acknowledge any attempt. Maybe it would be better if he turned around after all, before - "But it helps to do so, sometimes..." The words tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop himself. Damn it. "After... after..." Why was it so hard to say the name of that place? Alistair swallowed and tried again. "... Ostagar happened, it helped me."

Lenya glared at him. "I'm not you!"

"No, you are not." A hint of bitterness crept into his tone. "You can be glad about that, believe me."

Her eyes lost their hostility for a moment as she frowned at his words. "Leave me alone, human. I don't need your pity."

Funny - wasn't he just pitying himself right now? Alistair mirrored her frown. Exhaling, he shifted his stance. He was still towering over her with his sheer height and felt awkward about it. "I just think it is better to cry than to suppress everything that is troublin-"

She was on her feet in an instant, the skinning knife swinging at his throat stopped only by his quick reflexes and greater reach.

"I said, leave me alone!" Lenya screamed, every word accompanied by a tremble. Her eyes locked with his, her body completely tense. Each shuddering breath was a struggle against the need to cry. His heart thundered in his ears as he held her wrist and her gaze. Just like in camp, he knew he should look away, but just like in camp, he couldn't. Her pain and hurt made it impossible, mirroring his own so clearly. If only she knew... But this, this wasn't about him, nor did he have the right to make it so. Or else he wouldn't be any better than the jerk in the song. Her eyes, the fierce forest green unchanged since first meeting his in Ostagar, held on in defiance, even as they glistened with unshed tears. Underneath his fingertips, she flexed her hand into a fist around the knife's handle until he could feel the rage vibrating off her skin.

Alistair let go of her hand, but not her gaze, and took a step back. "I'm sorry," he managed in a whisper, meaning so much more with these two words than he was able to express. He heard the dull thud of the blade as it hit the ground, saw a glimpse of a tear rolling down her cheek as it spilled over at last. Lenya whirled away and melted into the crevice, trying to stifle her sobs and failing. His hand itched with the need to put it upon her shaking shoulder, to tell her once more that it was okay to cry. He suppressed the urge, because right now, he was nothing more than an intruder, like the guy in the song.

"Just... please come back before I managed to burn all the meat you prepared," Alistair said instead, and turned around to heed her wish of privacy, even as her sobs increased in volume.

Chapter End Notes
Change Notes:

Some in-game dialogue, otherwise completely original/added scene and newly written. Means it didn't exist in any shape or form in my old version of this story :D

Let me know what you think about it in the comments. What did you like and what not? Will these sad, traumatized kids ever be happy and/or get along? (*cackles*)
Chapter Summary

We left off with Lenya running off, upset about Leliana's song, and Alistair following her to calm her down, which went as well as you can imagine. This is the aftermath of that, plus their journey to a small village for supplies, which leads them astray to collect their newest companion... in Honnleath.

Chapter Notes

I won't bore you with reasons for my long disappearance now. Let's just say that there were plenty, broken PC and mental health issues among them. Hope there are still readers left for this thing though. Oh well. Enjoy?

Thanks to Moonlightbrunette for help with grammar stuff and beta reading.

When Lenya resurfaced from a sea of tears she couldn't say. Only that when she did, she was no longer alone. Unlike the nosy human before, his company she could tolerate. Noticing her gaze, Revas heaved his head and looked at her, whining.

Lenya sniffled, wiped at the remaining tears in haste. "Don't worry, I'm better now."
Unsurprisingly, what Alistair had been said about crying had turned out to be true. Not that she needed, nor wanted a human to tell her what she already knew, but the rage burning in the pits of her stomach was gone now. Exhaustion of the sort only felt after a long, hard cry had taken its place. Maybe this was worse, since the fury at least had kept her upright and going. Now, there was only emptiness. The kind that made her want to lie down on the spot and sleep. Given the new nightmares now haunting her, that was out the question. At least here and now.

Lenya huffed out, the sound loud in the stillness of night. Birds overhead let out a sharp, piercing call, warning their mates of predators in the dark. There was also the crackle of the two fireplaces, the calming pop and sizzle of wood burning within its flames. The tongue lolling out of his mouth, Revas panted and cocked his head at her. "Yeah, you are right. We should probably return to the others."

Slowly, she stood up, and groaned upon the ache found within her muscles. Rolling her shoulders did little to alleviate the pain, though helped her to focus. Her gaze fell on the abandoned skinning knife in the grass beside her. Lenya's breath hitched upon the remembrance of the events it entailed, the impulsiveness of her action not long ago. But she had warned him, hadn't she? It wasn't her fault if the human was not heeding her warnings, nor her boundaries. Sighing out, she reclaimed the knife from the ground and sheathed it. Still, perhaps this had been a step too far. The shock and hurt within his eyes right after she tried to - ugh, why was she even thinking about that? It was not like she owed him, or anyone within this camp, anything; her own survival aside, maybe. And obviously this was far more for her own benefit than for them. Because what good would she be dead to anyone? If she had such little to no choice in the first place, like the maiden in
this creator-damned song of her people, she could at least choose to survive. This, she owned Tamlen... and her clan. Noticing her mood shift to something somber, her mabari bumped his head into her leg with a whine.

Lenya petted him, forced a smile. "Ma serannas, lethallin."

She had taken only a couple of steps toward the camp's center, as a large shadow within her vision solidified in the massive body of the qunari. No longer dressed in the simple prisoner clothes but his own qunari armor, he looked down to her. "I don't understand. You look like a woman."

Swallowing down an annoyed groan, she rolled her eyes at him. "Wow, figured that out all on your own, huh? You are as smart as you are large, apparently."

"Thank you," he deadpanned, rivaling her sarcasm with his own. "But you said you are a Grey Warden."

Lenya crossed her arms. "Yes?"

"So it follows that you can’t be a woman."

"What?" she scoffed and made herself taller than she was. Derision was better and easier to conjure than giving into his circular halla-shit argument."Are you going to tell me next that women do not fight?"

"Exactly." Sten nodded. "Women are priests, artisans, shopkeepers or farmers. They don’t fight."

Lenya gulped in air and struggled to not give in to the sudden urge to punch him, instead of his face, into his more... reachable parts. "Nuva uralas telsyl na i’ga syl nyel laimem," she muttered under her breath, bristling.

"You speak a tongue I don't understand."

"Yes, well, that is the fucking point of it, you genius!" She glared back up to him, and emphasized every of her pointed words with an equally pointed poke of his armored chest. "But let me make it clear, once and for all, so even you oversized alas'bora can understand it." Her heart thumped against its ribcage, creating a furious rhythm within her ears. Hello rage, my old friend. "I am a woman. And I fight. Easy as. If you cannot accept that, then I suggest that you take your giant ass and put it back into the cage in that shemlen village."

With that, Lenya slipped away from his massive form into the direction of her tent, not caring in the slightest for any inane reply his limited mind could cook up.

"Ah, you have returned," a lilting voice said behind Lenya's back. After the qunari question her ability due to being a woman, and everything else on this shitty, way too long day, she truly hadn't the patience to deal with that shemlen now. Her gaze settled on the tent nearby; so close but suddenly so unreachable. Why couldn't they all leave her alone for one fucking minute? Or preferably the rest of the night? "I'm glad," she added as Lenya didn't react.

Anger danced like lightning on her skin, reawakened by that creator-damned qunari and his idiocy. Her hands closed to fists and opened again in quick succession, fighting for control over her temper. When Lenya whirled around to glare at the human, she knew she had lost the battle once more. "How dare you?"

The red-headed shem blinked upon her sudden outburst, unsure to react. "This song," Lenya elaborated, not giving her the chance to recover from her surprise. "It is not yours to perform.
Haven't you shemlen taken enough of my people already?"

"I..." the human tried, frowning. "... didn't mean to offend, Lenya."

"No, you humans never fucking mean to, but you do it anyway."

"I just thought you would like it, due to its origin," she said, sighing. "It must be hard being away from your people, no?"

"I didn't like it." Tears welled back into her eyes and she swallowed, thickly. Creators, she missed them, all of them. Even Hahren Paivel and his boring lectures. "It is stupid. A tale to scare small da'len from venturing from their clan. It is a warning about humans; about what happens when you trust them." She let out a scoff. "I bet you didn't know that, and took it for a romantic tale of love and loss. Well, it is fucking not!"

The shem calmly folded her hands in her lap and leaned forward to her. "You are right. I didn't know about that. But I never believed it to be a romantic tale, one of love. The hunter wasn't in love... he succumbed to lust. His greed, and pride made him believe that it was the tree making her reject him, that it was keeping her prisoner. In truth, the maid simply wanted to be left alone, which he was unable to see, nor respect. Thus the tragic end for her, alas." She tilted her head and smiled at the Dalish. "Thank you for telling me more about the song's meaning for your people. I will make sure to remember it."

Lenya wasn't sure what she had expected as a reply, but it wasn't that. Reasonable and kind, these words were irreconcilable with the picture she had of the human in her mind. But this was also the same human who'd inserted herself into their mismatching party because her shemlen god told her so in a vision. So, if anything, it was doubtful how much these words were actually worth. For now, Lenya settled for a shrug and a muttered "whatever" and ducked into her tent, leaving her sitting alone at the campfire.

Merinwood was an insignificant spot on the map, one Leliana didn't even know existed. A small farming village that lay much further west than Lothering did, to be exact. Which explained why its people would be spared from the soon approaching horde. For a time, at least. Being as small and hidden from the general public as the village was also meant that they weren't used to visitors. Thus each passing villager eyed the strange group and their steps with suspicion as they went their way.

"Why are we wasting our time here?" Sten groused, glaring down at the Dalish. "There is a Blight to fight."

"We are here for the missing supplies," Lenya countered, breaking her brooding silence for the first time today. "So unless you want to continue sleeping outside like you did in your cage, this trip is all but wasting time, idiot." With that she sped up her steps toward a large building in the village's center. Walking down an alley framed by askew houses build from mismatched wooden panels, Leliana peered over to the qunari. "What were you even doing in that cage, Sten?"

"Standing, as you observed," he stated, not missing a beat.

Leliana sighed out loud. Due to his stoic manner, he was hard to read for her, as were many of her other new companions for that matter. The only one who'd openly accepted her into this group had been Alistair and even he was uncharacteristically quiet today. Which had its roots in the events
with Lenya yesterday, no doubt. She'd seen the sadness within his expression, right after he'd returned from speaking with his fellow Warden. Instead of sitting down with her, he'd vanished into his tent and did not return till much later to keep watch in her stead.

"Were you really in that cage for twenty days?" Alistair piped up, as if reading her thoughts of being too quiet.

"It might have been closer to thirty," Sten replied with a shrug. "I stopped counting after a while."

He frowned at the qunari. "And what did you do? I mean... twenty days is a long time to stand in one place and do nothing."

"On good days, I posed riddles to the passersby, offering them treasures in exchange for correct answers," he said and Leliana arched an eyebrow at the qunari for these words. Underneath all his no-nonsense attitude seemed to lie a subtle humor. Interesting.

The Warden let out a gasp, intrigued. "Really?"

"No."

"Awww. Too bad. That's got serious potential." Alistair pouted, though it was short-lived since his attention shifted to the Dalish up in front of their group. "Alright... Lenya... do you want to visit the shop first or stop by the tavern first?"

Morrigan scoffed at him. "Can't you decide anything for yourself, fool?"

"Oh excuse me if I, unlike you, value the opinion of the people around me. One of them being my fellow Warden by the way," he shot back, his tone toward the witch far less friendly than with Lenya before.

"Word it as you want, but of the two of you that remain, you are the senior Grey Warden here. So I find it curious that you allow another to lead, while you follow." Her eyes narrowed to a glare. "In fact, you defer to a new recruit. Is this a policy of the Grey Wardens? Or simply a personal one?"

"What do you want to hear? That I prefer to follow?" He shrugged, not taking the bait laid out for him. "I do."

"Oh my, you sound so -" "Get out and don't you dare return!" Morrigan's words were cut short by a man being thrown out on the tavern's doorsteps.

Leliana rushed forward to help him up, but he refused to take her hand. Instead he stood up himself and dusted his clothes off. "I'm okay. Thank you, my lady."

"What happened there?" she asked him, noting the man's grey hair and withered, pale face. The intricate embroidery of his clothes gave away that he wasn't without money.

"Ah, just my luck." He sighed. "After the damn mule ran away I was stuck here and asked for help, when even my elf I sent fetching it didn't return."

Lenya crossed her arms and glowered up to him. "Your... elf?"

"I meant I sent my helper. Tarren. Nice fellow, that... Tarren. Sadly he'd disappeared, like my mule. Not that he is..." He stopped and cleared his throat. "But I digress. Allow me to introduce
myself instead: My name is Felix de Grosbois, merchant and entrepreneur. Nice to meet you...

He paused as he noticed the griffon emblazoned on Lenya's leather armor. "...Warden?"

"Yes?" she replied coolly.

"You may be able to help me, in this case."

She started tapping her foot. "Do I look like I'm here to help you, shem?"

The merchant flinched. "Maybe not, given with the rumors of a Blight going on and all that. But... maybe an exception. Just this once?"

Alistair stepped to her side. "What do you need?"

"Of all the bad luck I had on my trip, the worst is this artifact I bought in Jader." He reached toward his belt and at first glance what he brought forth looked like a weapon. "This is a control rod," he explained, weighting the small stick of gaudy fake gold in his hands. "For a golem. I got it from a longstanding contact, a dwarf who bought it from the golem's prior owner, or one of their relatives."

"A golem?" Lenya frowned, looking around into the faces of her companions. "What is a golem?"

"Tis a massive creature of stone, bound to the will of its owner," Morrigan replied. "As long you have the control rod, the golem is forced to do as you say."

"A massive creature of stone?" Lenya's stance relaxed, the curiosity blatant in her voice. "Really?"

"I couldn't have explained it any better, dearest, um, mage. " The man licked his lips, trembled a bit. "Well the problem is... the control rod didn't came with the golem, but I can mark its location on your map, if you'd like to, um, fetch it?"

"You want to give it to us?" Leliana eyed the gaudy rod in his hands. This offer seemed dubious, to say the least. "What do you want in return?"

"Me? Oh ho, nothing, really. I just don't want to have to lug around something that might be taken for a gemstone by some bandits, and they skewer me for it." The merchant sighed out. "Also I paid too much for it to simply throw it away."

"I see," Leliana said, relaxing a bit. "What is the catch?"

"The catch?" He blinked, but recovered quickly. "Yeah, I guess there is one, missing golem aside. The village where you will find it is overrun by darkspawn. But..." He gestured toward their griffon-winged armor. "... for you Grey Wardens this will be a minor problem, no?"

Lenya nodded. "Yeah, I think, we could do that."

"Really?" slipped out of Alistair's mouth and he earned himself a glare of the Dalish for that.

"Where is that village exactly, shem?"

The man's face lit up. "Like I said, I will gladly mark it on your map."

Honnleath was even further out into a north-western direction than initially expected. Hours had
passed since their departure from Merinwood and the sun stood low on the horizon behind clouds when the village finally appeared in the distance. Smoke rose in thick billows from the faraway buildings and sputtered skywards, indicating the destruction done there by the darkspawn.

So... Morrigan..." Leliana looked over her shoulder to the witch glowering at her back. As a bard, she had learned to read people like open books, but Morrigan made it more difficult. Like Lenya, she kept to herself and only showed people of herself what she wanted them to see. In spite of that - or because - she had piqued Leliana's interest, if only to ascertain that her own secret was safe. "You are a witch of the wilds, no? I heard tales about you..."

"Is this really the time to start idle conversation? We are close to battle." She turned away with a huff.

Leliana sighed. "It is just... so eerily quiet, and had been for hours, so..."

"...so you feel the need to fill the silence with useless noise?"

"No, but we are traveling together, possibly for a very long time," she tried to explain. "Thus it would be good to get to know each other, no?"

"What..." Morrigan paused to brace herself on her wooden staff, since the path to the village begun to wind upwards. "...do you also expect us to hold hands and go skipping through fields of flowers as well?"

"No." She suppressed a groan bubbling up her throat. It was maddening with how little effort the witch was putting her into a defensive position. "Just normal talk, Morrigan. Like people do."

Another sigh escaped her, masking little of the frustration felt inside. "For example, they say you are the daughter of Flemeth?"

"They also say that Orlais' minstrels are often spies employed by the empress's court," the witch shot back, not missing a beat. Leliana's steps hitched at that, which Morrigan bestowed with a knowing, sardonic smile as she quickened her own pace, passing her by. "I wonder if this is as true as what you are asking?"

"Not all minstrels are bards, or the other way around," she protested, her tone bearing too much defiance for her own taste. "People are often using both of these terms, thinking they mean the same. But they are different."

The witch gave her an once over. "This facade of yours is unconvincing."

"What does this -" Leliana gave up, refused to play her little game any longer. Besides, anything she would say would be in vain anyway. The witch had made up her mind and no argument would ever change it. Letting the rest of her words fade into a breath, she glanced at the wardens in front of her. Hopefully they hadn't heard what had been said. Seeing that they were simply marching ahead, silent as they had been for hours, she relaxed a bit again.

It was better if they thought her a simple chantry sister and minstrel traveling through the land with tales and songs. Easier for her too, for it provided her with the possibility to leave the past behind and instead live as this new self that brought her salvation from near-death and the things she'd done. She sped up her steps to be at one level with Morrigan, and tried anew. "Then do you know the stories about -"

"Of course." She scoffed. "You think my mother would let me go without telling me all the stories of her youth?"
Ah, so the rumors whispered in camp were true?

"My mother told me stories too." Leliana smiled. Finally something she could relate to with the witch. "She was the one who kindled my love of the old tales and legends." It was hard and unfair, having lost her mother so early in her life. Yet, she would always have her mother's passion for stories and the remembrance of her humming an old good night song, as she tucked her in bed as a child.

"Oh how nice for you." Morrigan stared straight ahead into the distance. "Alas, my mother's stories curdled my blood and haunted my dreams." She fell silent for a bit, and her face scrunched up in a grimace. Her voice quavered as she spoke again, though had lost nothing of its ire. "No little girl wants to hear about the Wilder men her mother took to her bed, using them 'til they were spent, then killing them. No little girl wants to be told that this is also expected of her, once she comes of age."

Leliana blinked, taken aback by her sudden candidness. I'm sorry, she wanted to say, but only managed a perplexed "I... uh... I see."

"No, you don't. You really don't." The witch fixed her with an angry look. Her amber eyes, usually unsettling, were glistening with unshed tears. "Leave me be, bard."

This time, Leliana did not follow her as Morrigan marched ahead to get away from her.

"Help!" she only heard, then instinct took over. Quickly firing an arrow at a hurlock giving chase to two dwarves, it hit the darkspawn in the throat, throwing it backwards. The two smaller genlocks were quickly dispatched by Alistair's sword and shield, while Lenya had fallen back, behind him.

"These are stragglers," Sten stated, as he speared the downed hurlock with his greatsword. His gaze lingered, surveying the area. "Undoubtedly, there are more ahead."

"Yeah, I thi-" Alistair nodded, his words cut short by Lenya suddenly doubling over, groaning in pain. "Lenya..." Alarmed, he rushed to her side, his weapon and shield falling to the ground, forgotten. "What is wrong? Are you injured? I don't think I even left one of them pass me."

Perhaps she was interpreting too much into his gestures, but it were small moments like these where it became apparent how much he cared for his fellow Warden. Yes, Leliana was also worried about her well-being, of course. So were the rest of the companions, for that matter. Revas whined and nudged Lenya's leg and Morrigan observed the scene at some distance, her posture tense. However, unlike the others, Alistair had such a panicked edge in his voice, and unlike the others he let his gauntleted hand rest on the small of her back. Leliana frowned as she watched him fussing over his fellow Warden. It seemed as if he wasn't even aware of doing all that. Huh, now his outright dismissal of his attraction to Lenya in Lothering finally made sense to her.

"No..." Lenya managed at last, coughing as if suppressing to gag. "You didn't. But my head it feels like as if it is about to explode."

"Tis the darkspawn," Morrigan stated. "Or rather your proximity to them."

"Oh..." Alistair breathed out and with the exhale, most of his panic dissipated as well. He stepped back, giving his fellow Warden room to breathe. "Right. You started to sense them, not long ago. I
can understand how this is overwhelming. It was for me too, at first."

"...says the human screaming in my head," she scoffed, with her hands on her knees.

"I do?" His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Huh."

"Yessss," Lenya hissed and took measured intakes of air before continuing speaking. "You are like these bugs buzzing around in summer at night when you are trying to sleep, but can't because they are too damn loud."

Morrigan pointed at him, her tone cool. "That is... an oddly accurate description of this idiot. Well done, Lenya."

"I'm a buzzing bug?" He cleared his throat to hide his amusement, albeit barely. "I must say this is the nicest thing you have said to me so far. I'm honored."

Lenya bestowed his comment with a groan and a roll of her eyes, which made him laugh out loud. Huh, they already had a certain dynamic, hadn't they? Alistair was able to lure the taciturn Dalish out of her shell with his very own brand of humor, however briefly. She was... more open around him. *Interesting.*

"I ensure you that I will attempt to scream quieter then, my lady." Inclining his head, he mock-bowed to his fellow Warden. "Besides," he added, letting the humor in his voice drop, "You will get used to it and then things should quiet down a lot, especially my buzzing in your head."

"And the splitting headache?" Standing upright again, Lenya grimaced and wobbled on her feet. "Is this always happening now whenever these bastards are near?"

"Short answer..."

"You are capable of that?" Morrigan interrupted with a sneer. "Wow."

"As I was saying..." Alistair gave the witch a sharp look that had nothing of the friendliness he showed Lenya or herself. "Once you get used to sensing darkspawn, it all should get much more subdued. Like a scratch at the back of her head. Give it time." He frowned. "No one knows how it is during a Blight, though. I guess... we have to wait and find out?"

"Thanks..." Lenya huffed. "I hate it."

He shrugged and reclaimed his weapon and shield from the ground. "That is what I'm here for: Witty one liners and being the bearer of bad news."

"Both are one and the same to me, really."

"Ouch." Alistair winced, albeit more in jest than real offense, since he was still smiling. "Meditation and working out helps a lot to drown out the buzzing and the nightmares, I have found."

"Grey Wardens?" a voice said behind Leliana's back. As she turned around to its source, she recognized it was the older dwarf they had saved only a couple of minutes ago. Weird that he was approaching them only now, though she hadn't been attentive to them either. "So far out in the west of Ferelden?"

"You are a long way from Orzammar yourself, dwarf," Morrigan replied, crossing her arms.
"Indeed, we are." The older dwarf nodded, stroking his brown, braided beard. "But we haven't been in Orzammar for many years, to be honest." Morrigan bestowed the reply with a scowl.

"Enchantment?" The other dwarf next to him pointed at the witch. His beardless face was round, almost childlike with its large blue eyes, staring at Morrigan in wonder.

"Ah, Sandal. Say hello to the nice mage lady."

"Hello." Sandal smiled at her, but her scowl only deepened.

"What were you both doing out here?" Leliana asked to end this weird impasse between dwarves and witch.

"Ah yes, right," the older man laughed out. "I forgot to introduce myself and to thank you for your unlikely but timely rescue." He inclined his head toward both Wardens. "My name is Bodahn Feddic, merchant and entrepreneur." He pointed next to him. "And this is my son Sandal."

"Hello," the young dwarf said again, still smiling.

"Another merchant?" Alistair frowned, stepping closer to the pair. "Out here?"

Bodahn opened his mouth to answer but he was stopped by Lenya speaking before he could. "You are a dwarf," she stated, her tone oddly bright after having just doubled over in pain. "I have never seen a durgen'len." She tilted her head, looking at them. "You are really tiny."

Alistair let out a small groan, though the twitch of the corner of his mouth belied his annoyance.

"Yes, my lady." Bodahn laughed, not at all offended by her statement. "And you must be Dalish in addition to being a Warden. I hadn't the pleasure yet to trade with your people, this is true." He glanced up to Alistair and cleared his throat. "Anyhow, I still owe you a reply for the reason of being here."

"Yes," Morrigan said before Alistair could.

"It was an unplanned detour, to be honest." Bodahn shrugged. "After leaving Lothering, we made a stop in Merinwood, where my son and I heard about the golem out here."

"You can't have the golem," Lenya said, less friendly now.

"Ah, no." He shook his head. "We were rather interested in the things people left behind after fleeing the darkspawn there. Alas, this part of the plan was not thought through, as the horde were still in the village."

Leliana fixed the dwarves with a glare. "You are scavengers, picking off the belongings from the dead."

"No, this is not all we do," Bodahn argued. "Our trade is an honest business."

"Honest?" she bristled, her voice rising. "Honest, how exactly? You steal from people!"

"Finders, keepers, shem." Lenya snapped, turning to glare at her. Then her stance loosened with a shrug. "Besides how is it different from when we are looting bodies?"

"You... do that?" Leliana gasped. Weren't the Grey Wardens better than this? Her eyes flung to Alistair for conformation or support, but he remained silent.
"If they are not darkspawn, why not?" The Dalish rolled her eyes. "The bandits had good money that we needed for supplies."

"It is a matter of respect for the dead!"

"Spare us your moralistic preaching, sister," Morrigan spat out the word like an insult. "Tis inane to let perfectly good resources rot along with the bodies."

The qunari nodded. "I agree with the mage."

She gave him a brief smile. "Oh, 'tis most surprising to hear this from you, dear Sten."

"I also agree that your tongue should be cut out, as it is customary for mages in my lands." With that, he walked away, toward the village.

Stifling a laugh at that, Alistair cleared his throat. "Not saying I'm comfortable doing so, but we aren't exactly traveling in the lap of luxury here. With no support from, well, anybody, we need everything we can get."

Lenya's head turned to him, surprised. "That is an... unexpectedly sensible approach."

"I have my moments." He chuckled, his voice dipping so low that it almost sounded like flirting. "However, don't expect me to rifling through graves any time soon, my lady."

"Ugh." Grimacing upon the name, she set out to follow Sten into the village. Leliana watched the Dalish leaving, torn between admiring and abhorring her nonchalance and disrespect shown for the subject matter. Deep down, there was an awareness blooming that this practical approach was needed, should they want to survive. Yet this was exactly what her old self would have done, without hesitation. She didn't want to be like this anymore, was better than --

"Well this settles then, I guess." Shaken out of her thoughts, Leliana rose her gaze just in time again to see how Alistair gave both dwarves and her an apologetic shrug. "Time to kill some darkspawn and find that golem. Not that I want to..." he added in a mutter.

"Wait..." Bodahn called after him, making him stop. "When we were fleeing from the darkspawn, I had to leave my wagon of wares behind. The trip already had been one disaster after the other, but losing my wagon would be devastating for us."

"Ah, so you want us to retrieve it?"

"I'm aware I have no right to ask after you already saved the life of my son and I, but - "

Another shrug of him. "Sure, we might as well. Two birds with one stone, huh?"

The dwarf let out a relieved sigh. "Thank you, kind Warden ser. We will be, um, waiting here for you then, until the air is clear."

Alistair's gaze shifted to her. "Are you coming, Leliana?"

She blinked away whatever of the unwanted memories lingered and readied her bow for the impending battle. "Y-yes, let's go."
Chapter Summary

In Honnleath, they search for a girl to be able to activate the golem, standing in the middle of the village. The cellar brings back unwanted memories, new revelations and unlikely aid offered, even long after it was left again. The golem turned out different than expected, but help against the Blight is help and worth the risk, right?

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not (yet) beta read, but I edited to my best abilities. I'm still no native speaker, so please forgive any mistake you come across. I just felt it was about time to update and as much I love my very busy beta, I couldn't wait for her any longer.

For everyone I haven't replied to in the comments yet, I will do so in the next couple of days. Don't worry. I just needed to get this chapter out ;)

Approximately zero point five seconds after setting foot into the mages' lab, Lenya regretted agreeing to save the brat playing hide and seek here.

It would be easier, better to simply turn back and and beat the correct activation word for the golem out of the stupid shem blackmailing her. Despite this, she moved forward and shielded her nose from the coiling stench assaulting her, bringing back unwanted memories. Rotten flesh mingled with musty mildew that clang the stone walls like vines. Water dripped down from the mucid, low-hanging ceiling near everywhere and pooled in foul smelling puddles, which Lenya eyed with disdain.

The ruins, back then, together with him had a similar lingering stench of decay and -

A bloodcurdling scream reverberating at the stone walls and deep in her bones halted all thoughts. "W-what was that?"

Morrigan let out a groan, the knuckles around her staff turning white. "Fantastic, there are shades present. I knew something was amiss with how the Fade feels here."

"Yeah, I don't like it either," Alistair said, shuddering. Right, the human had been trained as a templar and thus was capable of picking up on these subtle changes in atmosphere. The shift here was of the heavy kind, cloying Lenya's mind. Morrigan's reaction was all but reassuring either.

"What is a Shade?"

Morrigan turned around to her. "Tis not certain, so far. They are either the true form of demons when they appear outside of the Fade without a host, or the souls of the dead who have come back from the Fade into the mortal world."
"Great, I just had to ask..." Lenya muttered, each intake of foul air bringing her back to what was best forgotten. *Tamlen.* The ruins. Her heart hammered furiously against her ribcage and she staggered over her own feet, barely finding purchase against the clammy stone wall. Lenya gritted her teeth against the panic rising in tides and screwed her eyes shut. No, this was not happening. Not here, not now. Not *ever.*

"This is why women shouldn't fight," she heard Sten grumble, as distant as if her head was underwater. The room spinning around her made it impossible to react to Revas pawing at her, whining.

"Shut up, Sten!" her fellow Warden snapped, also so very distant. Then there was a hand on her shoulder, leading her away from the stench and the creatures lurking within. "Breathe," he said, so quiet it was nearly lost to the staccato of her heartbeat in her ears. Her throat was too tight, her breaths too shallow and small. "Just breathe, but focus on my voice, not your breathing. Can you do that, Lenya?"

Yes, she wanted to say, but managed only a whimper. She let herself be led further by his hand, until there was light breaking through the crack of a door and the stench had lessened to a more bearable degree. They stopped right outside of it, Revas in tow, still whining. "Okay, calm yourself," he said, a laughter in his voice. "I will talk now until you are well enough again to tell me to shut up. I know you want to, Lenya."

She opened her eyes in an attempt of a glare, but everything around her was still spinning way too fast. Instead, she stumbled into the wall opposite, only not falling down because her fellow Warden caught her in time and steadied her again. "Woah, easy there. Just keep standing on the spot and breathe." Alistair paused as if thinking about what to tell her. Revas sat down next to her, licking her gloved hand. "Oh I know... What do you call a wardog that is no longer there?"

*Jokes? Really?* Lenya let out another whimper. The cellar seemed preferable to *that.* She shrugged, signaling him that she was listening. Not that she had any choice, really.

"A *wasdog.*"

She let her head sink against the wall, its stone rough and cool underneath her forehead. True to his promise, he didn't stop talking. Alas. "What do you call a man with no body and no nose?" He paused for effect, but she heard it in his voice that he was eager to deliver the punchline. "Nobody nose."

Maybe she should just bash her head against said wall to end this torture imposed upon her. But while her throat was still too tight, it got a bit easier to breathe, now. His terrible, *terrible* method of distraction was actually... working. *Creators.*

"A mabari walks in a tavern. The bartender asks: "What will it be?" The mabari says nothing, because, hey, it *is* a mabari and cannot speak."

*Oh, Mythal's tits, have mercy, please.* Lenya managed a groan, while Revas huffed at him. He didn't seem to like Alistair's bad jokes either. "Lenya, did you hear of the guy whose left side got cut off?"

"No..." She forced the word out with the intent to stop him, but he only saw it as confirmation to continue.

"Oh, don't worry about him, he is *all right now.*"
Her head, no longer spinning, turned to him. "Oh, shut up!"

"See," he drawled, chuckling. "That wasn't so hard, wasn't it?"

"That was... excruciating." She gasped for air and her heart did still beat at a hasty pace. However, she was no longer rooted within that place, nor the memories. His unusual approach truly... helped. Ugh, still. "Never... do this again."

He flashed her a smile, all too smug. "Right. But it did help, didn't it?" Lenya sighed, but the corner of her mouth twitched upwards. Alistair ducked his head, to look her in the eyes. "Do you want to talk about what caused your panic attack?"

She turned away, moved toward the door. It was none of his business. "No, I don't."

"Okay." That easy acceptance of her refusal was unexpected, too. He opened the old wooden door and motioned her to come. "Back into the stinky lab and the creatures within then, right? Let's hope we quickly find the girl."

Quickly had been too optimistic a word to find that brat, as they had to trudge far deeper into Wilhelm's lab than hoped. Along the way, they ran into creatures of the Beyond - Shades, as Morrigan called them. Their bodies were like bulbous, deformed snakes, with long, sharp claws at each twisted hand and a demonic grin on their lip-less mouths. Lenya had heard stories of nightmareish creatures lurking in the shadows, waiting to possess an unsuspecting mage, told as a scare at the campfire in the dark. But knowing their name and form by being confronted with them and their ear-piercing screams was far worse than any tale. Thankfully, like any creature made real, they could be killed, or at least sent back to the Beyond for a time.

Now their trek down the winding corridors had led them into a spacious room with a domed ceiling. Faint daylight filtered through its cracked, colored glass, splaying in red and green dots against the dark ground. The air here was different, less musty but thick with ambient magic. It was hard to breathe and once more she did not want to move forward.

"Oh look! Someone's come to play!" a bright voice said, belonging to a blonde girl with pigtails. This had to be the damn kid they were supposed to find! Lenya was about to storm forward when she noticed the other creature resting at the girl's feet.

Wide-eyed, she rushed back, hiding behind Alistair's broad back. "C-cat," she managed, irrational fear gripping her heart.

"What...?" Alistair looked over his shoulder to her cowering form, confused. "What is this about?"

"You have come to play, haven't you?" the girl asked the group, oblivious to Lenya's distress.

"You are Amalia, right?" Alistair asked, letting out a small groan. "Please tell me there isn't some other little lost girl around here."

"That is my name," the girl replied, laughing. "And we're playing a guessing game."

"Right... and who is 'we', exactly?"

"Kitty and me, of course! You don't see anyone else here, do you?"
"Shoo, shoo!" Alas Lenya's attempts to drive the fluffy beast off from behind Alistair's back remained futile. She gave his back a small shove. "Make it go away, human."

"Wait... you are not joking?" Eyebrows drawn together, he gasped out a breath that suspiciously sounded like a laugh. She was going to kill him... later. "You are actually afraid of a cat?"

"Kitty is my friend and very clever," the girl beamed. "She says you'll want to take me back to my father, but I'm not going. She would be lonely!"

Ugh, she should wipe that stupid grin out of in his stupid human face. "It is just a cat, Lenya!"

"No, it is a fluffy, evil thing," she argued with the indignation of a five years old. Damn, she sounded way too whiny. His hackles raised and fangs bared, Revas growled at the animal. Good. At least her dog believed her.

"I would not suggest leaving in such hostile company anyway, Amalia. Look how vicious they are," said a female voice with an otherworldly, demonic echo to it, coming from the cat's muzzle. "Look how they act."

"The cat... talks?" the chantry shem uttered, shock coloring her voice.

Morrigan scoffed at her, readying her staff. "Tis a demon, you chantry nitwit, no cat!"

"A demon..." Lenya laughed out loud, her stance relaxing as these words sank in. "Not a cat."

Alistair raised an eyebrow at her. "Oh suuure, this is so much better indeed." He turned toward the girl. "Amalia, you better step away from this... creature."

"Nothing you say will convince Amalia to go with you," the demon-not-cat smugly chimed in, stretching its ugly cat-like limbs. "She loves only me now. I am her friend, while you are just a stranger."

Revas growled again, his bark sharp at the creature. Lenya used the distraction to step forward, away from the protection of her fellow Warden's back. "This is stupid." Keeping her eyes trained on the girl instead of the non-cat still unfortunately looking like one, she hurried forward. "We need the girl. I'm not leaving without her."

"N-no! I don't wanna leeeeeeeaaaaavee!" Amalia cried out, struggling against Lenya's grip on her hand with all her might. "Kitty! Help!" Disregarding the girl's fierce protest, she pulled her toward the steps.

She just had to reach the exit with her. The wards should hinder the demon from leaving the room. Once she was on top of the stairs, Lenya pushed the girl into the chantry shem's arms. "Leave!" The human understood immediately, seized the kicking and screaming kid and rushed through the threshold of the door. After they passed, the magical barrier shimmered briefly before dissipating into invisibility again.

"Noooooo!" the demon roared in anger at the loss, sounding more like its true abhorrent self now. "What have you done?" Bright light flashed within the room as the entity shifted and grew, blinding Lenya to its impending attack. Someone pushed her to the side, and losing her purchase, Lenya tumbled down the few flight of stairs. She hit the ground hard with her back, robbing her of all air. Claws scratched against metal, meeting and ripping flesh. Struggling against her vision blurring, she heard Alistair cried out, pained.

Oh no...
She had to get up again, fast. Ignoring the wave of dizziness swarming her, Lenya rolled to the side. Snarling, Revas put his massive body as a barrier between her and now full-sized demon, and jumped at it. Sinking his fangs into the mid-rift of the all-too female body, the demon stumbled back, giving Lenya enough time to evade and get back up. Howling in agony, the demon summoned a spell, which threw Revas skittering across the room.

No.

"Get down!" Morrigan yelled and Lenya obeyed, ducking. A bolt of ice shot overhead, almost grazing her as it engulfed the lunging demon. Then the witch snapped her finger and the frozen creature splintered in bloody pieces, like brittle glass.

"A desire demon, of all things," she groaned, gasping for air. "That brat better be worth it, Lenya."

"Revas!" Jumping back up, Lenya ran to the other side of the room, where her mabari still lay. Seeing her approaching, he heaved up his head and wagged his stumpy tail. "Are you hurt, da'fen?" His tawny fur was coated in blood and it was unsure how much of it was his own. She checked his body for injuries, and to her relief found no external ones. Reaching into her belt bag, Lenya fed Revas a bit of elfroot paste, to ease any possible pain and bruises he could have.

"Of course she would choose the dog over me," Alistair muttered from across the room.

"Who wouldn't?" Morrigan quipped, before a huff followed. "False twinge of heroism, I see?"

"Nothing false about saving my fellow Warden from being skewered in the head, witch." He groaned out, and as Lenya turned to him, he was clutching his right shoulder. Blood spilled from the wound there and trickled down the steel of his Warden armor.

Creators, it had been him pushing her out of the way! He took a blow destined for her. "Are-"

"Alistair!" The chantry shem's outcry swallowed up any words upon Lenya's lips. The shem rushed to his side, fussing over him. "You are hurt! Is it bad? Let me see."

"Oh, it is just all peachy, Leliana." He grimaced as the human probed his shoulder. "Would be even peachier if you have some elfroot salve and a bandage to stop the bleeding, at least. We can properly stitch it up later, in camp." She nodded and started to cautiously remove his pauldron, for better access to the wound.

"I'm so sorry!" The girl, now calm again, stared wide-eyed at her fellow Warden. Sniffing, she burst into tears. "I didn't want that to happen!"

"Great, now I made her cry." Alistair sighed. "Seems to be the usual effect I have on people."

"We better get the brat out of here," Morrigan said, motioned Lenya to come over. "Tis about time her father pays up for her rescue."

"Where is my da?" Glancing up to the witch through tearful blue eyes, Amalia received no answer. "He is waiting outside of the cellar," Lenya replied in her stead. "Now go, da'len, or I make you!" With Revas in tow, she passed Alistair without a glance.

"Daddy!" Upon leaving the building, Amalia threw herself into the shemlen's arms with a giggle.
He caught her and whirled her around, laughing along with her. “I’m sorry I ran away, Daddy. I was so scared.”

A disgusted noise emerged from Morrigan's direction, while Sten simply watched on, stone-faced as ever. Lenya should be glad to have saved the human child, shouldn't she? But all that was lingering inside was a pang of annoyance of having to witness this sappy scene of reunion. Similar to the witch, and yet... different in a way she was incapable to grasp. It wasn't entirely fair either, as the girl, while reckless, was innocent and didn't deserve to end up as a host for a demon, or worse, to perish. Why then, was all this regret nagging at her?

"It is okay, my butterfly. You are safe now." The shem put her down and turned toward her, grinning over both ears. "Maker, you have found Amalia. I cannot thank you enough."

Crossing her arms, Lenya let her annoyance run free rather to mask it. This human had cost her way too much time and detours already, which, was part of her irritation flaring up. No matter the happy outcome, this shem had forced her into finding his daughter. "You can start by telling me the correct phrase to activate the golem over there."

He sighed, handing her a piece of paper. "I wrote it down here for you, Warden. A promise is a promise, even if I would prefer to never see Shale active again." The shem glanced down to his daughter, then back at her, hesitating. "Some of my father’s spells laid rune lines around the village that could be reactivated. He used to say they would stop anything short of a giant. You would be safe to stay the night before setting out again, and are most welcome to do so."

Lenya peered around in the village. Some buildings were still on fire and the whole area clouded in thick smoke that bit in her nose. Bloodied corpses of darkspawn and villagers alike were strewn about just about everywhere on the ground. She scoffed. "I don't think so."

"Suit yourself." He shrugged. "If there isn't anything else..."

"Yes, if the phrase doesn't work," she said, each word a threat. "You have got a problem."

"It will work." The shemlen nodded, holding her stare. "I simply prefer not to be around to see the golem activated." He took his daughter's hand. "Come, Amalia, we should go. Tomorrow we are going to leave for Redcliffe."

"Goodbye, grumpy elf lady." The kid waved to her in a brightly fashion, trailing behind her father trying to drag her away. "Thank you for saving me."

"Urgh, I knew the day would come when someone would find that control rod!"

The re-awoken golem was... not what Lenya expected, mildly put. White glowing slits were forming its eyes and it used them to stare down at her. "Huh, and not even a mage this time! Probably stumbled upon the rod by accident... typical!"

The cynical, blunt voice that emanated from the orifice carved in the golem’s face serving as a mouth was booming and echoed into all corner of the village. Staring back up to the golem, Lenya stemmed her hands into her sides, to make herself broader and to feel less like an ant about to be squashed. "Well, hello to you too," she replied in the same sarcastic tone.

"Hah, the Painted Elf has nerves and confidence, I see. Other squishy things would have already trembled and cowered in fear." The golem’s head creaked as it tilted it to the side. "I'm uncertain if
It is brave or simply foolish."

"A bit of the former and much of the latter," Sten muttered, shaking his head.

"You are... oddly grouchy for a creature carved from stone," Lenya stated, ignoring the Qunari's comment.

"Pah." It scoffed. "It would be too, if it stood here and watched those pathetic villagers scurry about for over thirty years."

"Then both of you will get along just fine," Alistair quipped, his nonchalant words betrayed by the way he snapped for air in between. Lenya glanced over the shoulder to him. His forehead was sweaty and the normally warm brown color of his skin carried an ashen hue. He was, by all definition, not well, and it... was her fault.

"And then there was the darkspawn attack," the golem continued grousing, oblivious to her fellow Warden's distress. Or more likely, not caring. "I never thought I'd see anything more boring than the villagers, but there it was."

"You watched the attack happen?" the chantry shem asked, taking a step forward.

"Not as much as one might think; there was shouting and screaming and running about, and then days and days of watching the darkspawn prowl about. Dreadfully dull." It paused for a moment, as if thinking. "Sooo, are the villagers all dead?"

"Not all, no." The shemlen shook her head.

"Some got away, then? Very disappointing."

Alistair frowned. "You really don't like the people here, do you?"

"It likes stating the obvious, doesn't it?" The golem gave him something akin to a glare. "Then let me be very obvious too, for its sake: I'd have happily torn down their houses and stomped them all to paste. After thirty years of standing about in this village, I'd have done it twice."

"Fair enough, I guess?" he added, though the golem was far from done with complaining.

"What I didn't like was being ordered to do it. ‘Golem, bring that chair over here.’ ‘Do be a good golem and squash that insipid bandit,’ and let's not forget ‘Golem, pick me up. I tire of walking!’ Bah!" After finishing its rant, the golem’s gaze shifted to herself again and the object in her hands. "I see the control rod and yet... Go on. What is its command?"

"A command?" Lenya looked down to the useless bauble in her hands. Oh, right. It had an actual purpose, after all. "Hmm... let's see." She paused to deliberate. "Go attack Alistair!"

"Hey, already wounded party here," he whined. "Not fair!"

"Hmm, nothing." The golem cocked its stony head. "I feel no need to follow Its order."

"You appear to possess free will then."

It shifted to glower down at Morrigan. "Great, there is a mage, after all."

"Tis a good thing, I was about to say," she added, her eyes narrowing at the creature. "Now... I am not as certain anymore."
“A mage with a smart mouth, even,” The golem snorted. “I thought they were normally squished while still in their larval stage.”

"Oh..." Lenya said. "...like you did with your former master?"

"Ah yes. I remember I had a former master. The mage with the furry brows who poked and prodded and barked orders." The golem laughed out loud. "I think his last order was 'Golem! Stop crushing my head! Ha."

Well, this didn't bode well. Maybe awakening the creature had been a mistake after all. "How will I be able to trust you then not doing the same with me?"

"I don't know," it replied. "How does the Painted Elf trust other people without a control rod?"

"Easy." She peered into the round, and her fellow Warden winced a little, when she uttered these two words: "It doesn't."

"Fair enough. I will promise to not sit on It, at least. Unless the Painted Elf annoys me or start barking inane orders like the mage." The golem stopped its words. "What is it that It does, anyhow? It must have awoken me for a reason."

"Killing darkspawn and other things, mostly." Lenya shrugged. "Could use your help in that."

"Darkspawn, the very creatures that destroyed this village. Is it a Grey Warden, then?" She nodded, stopped short of rolling her eyes. No matter what she wanted, this was now what all creatures - stone or not- were now recognizing her as. "The darkspawn are an evil that must be destroyed, it's true, though not as evil as the birds... damnable feathered fiends!" the golem groused, white gleaming eyes squinting in disgust.

"Birds, really?" Okay, with her irrational fear of cats, Lenya wasn't exactly in the position to judge the creature.

"Indeed. I have an extremely justified rage of the flying vermin that plague this world. I am called Shale, by the way," the golem added as an afterthought.

"I'm Lenya Mahariel, but I guess you won't call me that, huh?"

"It does possess some resemblance of intelligence after all. Congratulation."

"Shale?" Alistair chuckled and swayed on his feet, unsteady. "Is this your name.. or what you are made of?"

"The Warden Clown thinks It is funny, I see. Would It prefer I was called Flint? Pebbles? How about Rubble?" Shale sneered, giving her fellow Warden an once over. "It looks broken. If It falls down, I won't carry It."

"I'll manage, thanks," he scoffed, clutching his injured shoulder. "Besides, I will be already satisfied when you are not stomping on me."

"Depending on the rate of Its jokes and their abysmal quality, that remains to be seen." With that, the golem moved with heavy steps toward the village's exist, not waiting, nor caring if the others would follow.

"Death to all pigeons!" rang as cry from the golem in some distance, before a panicked flock of birds was maimed into a bloody paste.
As if making certain the creature was out of earshot, so to speak, Alistair waited to voice his concern. "Are you suuuure it is a good idea to take that cynical, murderous rock with us?"

Seeing how unpredictable the golem was, Lenya really, really wasn't. But she could hardly tell him that, not after everything that - She shook the thought away and trained her expression into neutrality. "Just think of it as a portable battering ram."

"Right. Better it than me, honestly. I had my share with it already." He gave her a pointed look. "Was not fun." For a split moment when their eyes met, the two words 'I'm sorry' were on the tip of her tongue, though they weighted too much to actually set them free.

"Let's go," she said instead and turned, cursing her own pride and his ability to make her question it.

They made camp not far from the village, at the foot of the grassy hilltops surrounding it. With the darkspawn horde gone and dealt with, the remote location of Honnleath turned out to be a blessing. Out here, no one would be bothering them and perhaps even a good, long rest after this exhausting day would be possible. Given the darkspawn haunting her dreams, Lenya wasn't counting on it, however.

After a long hour of setting up camp to an acceptable degree with the others, she sat cross-legged on her spread-out bedroll underneath an overcast, darkened sky. The kit of metal oil and rags placed beside her, Lenya started to clean the crusted blood off her blades. Not only was maintenance of her weapons needed to keep them in usable shape, the repeated wiping and polishing motion also was... relaxing. The single-minded focus of it helped to forget everything around her, even if it was just for a few moments.

Revas lay near motionless at the other end of her bedroll and whined in his sleep. Frowning at the sound, Lenya stopped briefly to reach out to him. Blood and dirt were still clotting his coarse fur and his paws twitched as he exhaled. Was he in discomfort? Did she overlook internal injuries? Her head snapped up, searching for Morrigan in the half dark. She found her wandering at the camp's perimeters close by, almost like the golem - Shale - did.

"Morrigan..."

The witch made a displeased sound upon hearing her name; subtle yet loud for her elven ears. As she turned around to the source of the sound, Lenya saw her holding oval stones within both of her hands; protective runes, no doubt. Despite her bluster and general standoffish nature, the witch always took greatest care in securing their camp's boundaries before settling down herself.

"What do you wish of me?" Each of her words were leaden with the wish of being left alone and the underlying threat of what would happen to those not heeding it.

"I was wondering if you still have some of these magical enhanced potions?"

"I will not waste them on Alistair," she bristled, not missing a beat.

"No," Lenya hurried to explain. "I need one for Revas. He seems to be in pain."

"Oh..." she left the word hanging, instead closed the physical distance. Just for a second her pale yellow eyes flicked over to were the mabari lay, before seizing her again. "I see. I will look for a vial in my satchel, once I have completed my current task."
"Thank you." Lenya nodded and scowled right after uttering these words. Not at Morrigan, no, but at herself. Why was the act to say it to Morrigan so easy, whereas with her fellow Warden she couldn't even -

A pained hiss behind her halted her thoughts. She turned around, seeing the redhead helping Alistair to remove his upper armor and protective clothes underneath. He flinched whenever the fabric touched the makeshift-bandaged wound, his motions cumbersome. To her feet, the shem had placed a sewing kit, clean rags and a bowl with steaming water. The telltale sweet smell of elfroot wafted from it into her direction. Before Lenya even was aware of what she was doing, she was already on her feet and addressing the humans behind her.

"L-let me."

Both of them simply stared at her, making her feel as stupid like she probably was. With her stomach in knots, she closed the little distance between them.

"I will... tend to the campfire, then, yes?" Ugh, she hated the laughter within the shem's voice and even more how she made a show of backing away. Lenya pointedly ignored her, didn't want to see the amusement within her expression.

Alistair shifted from one foot to the other, glanced about everywhere that was not her face. His healthy shoulder bunched in an attempt to make himself smaller, less visible, maybe. Crossing his naked chest with one arm, he dug the fingernails of his hand into the palm of his other and winced as the self-inflicted tension turned into pain. He exhaled audibly, shifted again. "You... don't have to do this."

Lenya rolled her eyes at his antics. "Don't be such a *da'len.*" She glanced up to his injured shoulder, close to her head. The cotton bandage there was already seeped through, turned crimson with his blood. The wound needed to be stitched. She removed her leather gloves and threw them on the ground next to them. "Wait here. I need to clean my hands first. Better yet, sit. Or else I can't -" she bit her lip, swallowing up her frustration about his impossible height. Resigned to his fate, Alistair only nodded.

Turning around to fetch the piece of soap and her water skin from her satchel, Lenya nearly toppled over Morrigan. The witch was kneeling over Revas and feeding him half a vial of a healing potion. "Watch your steps, Warden," she groused, without looking at her.

Lenya snorted. "Well, last time I checked this is *my* bedroll you are kneeling on."

"Rather that of these two dwarves now lingering in our camp like parasites."

"Eh, details, details." She shrugged. "Besides, Bodahn offered us a fair discount for his wares, if being allowed to stay here with his son. I don't mind the *durgen'len*, as long they keep to themselves."

"Like you don't mind the bedroll's prior, probably dead owner?"

"Creators, now you sound like the *other* shemlen," she said, biting down an annoyed groan. "We had no chance to shop in that shem village due to chasing after Shale, so this is the next best thing." Taking her water flask, she rinsed her hands with water first, then with the small piece of soap.

"The dwarf had much we needed, and lot of it was free of charge or reduced in price for their rescue. My clan -" Lenya froze on the spot, ice filling her veins before the ache of its chill reached her heart. "Never mind," she muttered, dropping soap and water skin on the spot, in favor of running from the meaning of these words.
She found Alistair in an awkward half-kneeling, half sitting position. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I?" she snapped, evading his questioning gaze.

"Well, your hands... are still soapy."

"Oh." Taking a clean rag from the ground, she busied herself with wiping off the lather. After this was done, she gave each trembling finger and nail an extra scrub, if only to have something for her mind to focus on.

He pointed over at Morrigan. "Did the evil witch -"

"She did nothing, okay?" Lenya made the mistake to meet his eyes. She shirked from his gaze right after, and blinked several times to get rid of these damn tears lingering there. But the damage was already done; he knew. "Just... memories," she quietly admitted after a while, to the surprise of herself.

"I see." Tilting his head with a hum, he inhaled to speak further.

"No, I don't wanna talk about it," she added before he could do so.

"Okay."

Much to Lenya's relief, he wasn't pushing any further. Which was surprising, given how nosy this human was. He remained silent after that... which was better this way. She could focus on the here and now and her task, instead of grief for things lost. No one would be helped with her giving in to it, to missing them.

"You have done this before," Alistair remarked, disturbing the lingering stillness between them another moment later. Of course he would. She did not reply. She needed to concentrate on pushing the needle and thread through the edges of the long, curved claw mark across his shoulder blade. He winced each time the needle was inserted and exited his skin, which was a lot. The washed away blood and dirt left the wound angry red and gaping, though thankfully was not bone-deep. With the stitches and given enough time, it would heal quite nicely.

"Obviously..." Lenya paused to throw a look down at the human. He was sitting fully on the ground now, while she had remained standing at his right side. Still, even in a more relaxed sitting position, that human was hulking and tall. Without meaning to, he took up a lot of space next to her. "Or else I wouldn't have offered."

"Hmm," he hummed again and an irritating smile bloomed upon his lips. "No other reason, then?"

After finishing the last stitch within his skin, she cut off the excess twine from the needle with her small knife; maybe more harshly than truly needed. "Oh, sorry." she quipped, being not sorry at all.

"No, you are not..."

"Yes, I am..." She cleaned her hands with the remaining water. "You pushed me down, out of harm's way." This time, Alistair had no smart-mouthed comment. Instead he only looked up at her, as if waiting for her to elaborate. So she did. "Why?" she asked, her voice near a whisper. "Why did you do this?"

"Weeeell," he drawled, in certainly the most punchable tone possible for humans. "If you have to ask why I saved -"
"Are you always that annoying with replying to simple questions?" she snapped. "Ugh, if you don't want to tell -"

"Because we are Grey Wardens," he hurried to say, meeting her challenging gaze openly. All humor and pretense were gone from his voice, to the point where he almost sounded... raw. "We are the only ones left. There is... no one else." He released a breath that came out as a shaky sigh. "So... we have to take care of each other, right?"

Her hand bunched in the cotton of the fresh bandage she had yet to apply, any words caught within a tight throat. The way he spoke... it was too familiar for comfort, opened up wounds she kept hidden and close. Damn it. Lenya swallowed and blinked, while wrapping the cloth around his shoulder and arm to secure it in place. His built was fitting for a frontline warrior, yet so different to the male hunters she had helped bandaging before. Again, the thought seized her heart with its wistfulness, of things lost. "Will it get better?"

"I will be fine in a few days, don't worry. We Wardens heal fast-" Alistair's mouth clicked shut as he finally grasped the intention of her words. "Oh. Um, I'm not sure? I, err -" Sighing, he drove an erratic hand through his already tousled sandy-blond hair. "I hope so." He seemed to blink faster now, his eyes straying away, into the distance. "But it is... hard."

"Yeah." This, they had in common; this strange human and her. She could acknowledge that, but anything beyond? No, rather not. Because so much about him was able to set her off, even without trying. He was an irritating shem; boisterous and his bad jokes were just, well, so terribly awkward and bad, and she wanted nothing but to be far away from him. If not for Ostagar, she would have never spared a glance at him in the first place. And yet in Honnleath he shoved her out of the way, didn't hesitate a second to take the blow destined for her. So much about him was -

"Thank you for patching me up," Alistair said, taking her brooding silence for a sign of disinterest in further conversation. "I really appreciate your help, Lenya." He reached down to his satchel and hissed out in pain upon the too fast motion.

"You have got to keep your shoulder still, idiot!" She yanked the small bag out of his hands. "The elfroot salve should kick in soon and numbing the pain."

"That is... good to know. Can I get my bag back, please? Since, you know, I feel terribly underdressed right now." He pointed at the full set of armor she still wore. "Especially in comparison to you."

"Ugh," Lenya grimaced and nearly threw the bag into his lap. Maybe she should forget about it, and leave. Her skin itched in places she couldn't scratch and -

"There is a small stream outside of camp, in case you want to clean more than your hands," he noted by the way. "This is where Leliana got the water from you used just now, only in, um, cold form."

"Obviously."

Holding the bag awkwardly in between his knees, he struggled to untie the knot with one hand. Creators, he was helpless like a small da'len with this injury. "Give it to me!" She reclaimed the satchel once more. Opening it up, she managed to pull out a large linen shirt upon first try. Thank the gods it was directly in reach! Not to think about if she had to search any longer for it, ugh.

"Ah." Alistair made a small noise akin to a whimper and his brown cheeks adapted a faint pink. "I can dress on my own, thank you. You don't have to -"
Disregarding his protest, Lenya pulled the shirt over his head. It smelled of the bag’s leather and soap, now mixing with the earthy elfroot and sweat upon his skin. She wrinkled her nose. She was in no position to complain, given how much blood and dirt was also clinging to her armor and own skin. And she was waaaaay too close to him now. She took a hasty step back, leaving him to do the rest. "I, um," He cleared his throat, the flush of pink in his cheeks now more pronounced than ever. "That was unexpected. Are you sure you didn't hit your head, back in Honnleath? Or did the darkspawn kidnap my fellow Warden and left us a doppelganger when I wasn't looking?"

Creators, not his crappy jokes again. "Ugh."

"See, that is more like it." He chuckled, tilting his head in amusement. "I was getting worried for a minute there with all your niceness. And while... unexpected, I appreciate it," he added after a bit. "But I have already taken up too much of your time."

Lenya crossed her arms. "On this we can agree..."

"Thought so," he said, still smiling. "Since you look tired and hadn't even time to undress yet." He stopped short, his eyes growing wide. "I, um, oh Maker. The armor, I mean. Not the rest, of course. Unless -" His mouth plopped shut and Alistair buried his head into his good hand with a groan.

Maybe it was the exhaustion finally catching up with her, maybe she was simply going insane, but there was nothing she could do to stop the laughter bubbling up her throat. It started small, with a snort and suppressed giggle and quickly turned into her doubling over and chortling loudly.

"What a relief that my social ineptitude is so amusing to you, my lady."

It was stupid and Lenya tried to stop. But the laughter rippled through her like pond’s surface hit by pebbles, pulling her back in just when she thought to have calmed down. Yep, this was it. She was losing her mind and was having a blast doing so.

Alistair's stare lingered on her throughout it all, and probably those from the rest of this fucking camp as well. "Aaaareee you quite alright?" His grin was audible in his voice, tinged with disbelief. Though the uncertainty was lost soon in the warm timbre of his own laughter; breathy at first, as if trying to keep it in check. Then, it shifted into something rumbling, loud and genuine as he laughed along with her, and probably didn't even know why. Not that it mattered much at this point.

Resting her hands on her knees, Lenya inhaled sharply in the umpteenth attempt to not let dissolve into another snort upon releasing. Pressing her eyes shut, she exhaled and... nothing. Thankfully, so. Her heart hammered loudly against hurting rips. Not only from laughter, but the bruises forming there, from her earlier fall down the steps. She was struggling for air and the world around her spun a bit too quick, yet for the first time in weeks the tension, wrung tightly like a knot inside, was gone.

"No," Lenya replied belatedly, looking up at him. "I'm not alright, but -" she let the remaining words fade into a sigh. "I should leave. Undressing and all."

"Riiight." He arched an eyebrow at her, his lip still curved into a lopsided grin. "Laugh all you want... no wait, you already have."

Her sigh was more weary this time, without bite. Lenya turned to leave, then stopped once more to look over her shoulder. "Goodnight, Alistair."

"Aww, so she does know my name," he said behind her, sounding far more pleased that he had any
right to be.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

While I took over some elements from the old chapter (catphobia! It is a thing. No, really) I reworked it in regards of pacing a lot and cut out a lot from the old version. Amalia is also saved here instead of dying, which is a more satisfying ending and leaves the possibility to encounter them again. The camp scene is completely new and pretty much the jumpstart for a better understanding between both Wardens. Hey Alistair gets the name upgrade after all ;) It is still a long, complicated path for both of them (and the others) ofc. Also please appreciate my dad jokes, I am quite proud of them xD

Thank you for reading. Kudos/Comments are always appreciated. Let me know what you think about this chapter <3
Compromise

Chapter Summary

In which Alistair and Lenya find solace in shared, yet different grief and learn to reach a compromise after a fight.

Chapter Notes

I suck in updating this thing, I know. Sorry. Here have a chapter, at last, in all its unbetad glory, cough. I will fix it up later to the best of my non-native speaking abilities, but I feel it was about time to get it out. Enjoy nonetheless?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Butterfly, Butterfly," a little girl with long blonde hair sung, and followed its fluttering path with her eyes, hopping up and down.

Suddenly the insect made a turn and flew deeper into the woods. She ran after it without a second thought, dry twigs cracking under her light steps. Eventually, the butterfly landed upon the hollow trunk of a tree, near a massive, green-leafed oak. Giggling, she inched a bit closer to observe it. Its delicate, yellow wings were beautiful.

The girl crouched down to quietly move closer to the trunk, in the same way a grown up hunter had shown her. Warmth bloomed within her chest when she’d managed to approach the butterfly without scaring it away. She reached her hand out to the insect, wanted to touch it, causing it to fly away. It drifted high up into the sky, passing the foliage of the trees until it was gone.

She pouted as her green eyes followed the insect on its way to the sky. Now she didn't have anyone to play with and Ashalle was still busy with boring, grown-up things she didn't understand. There, a rustling of branches! Her eyes darted in the direction of the noise, and startled upon what she saw. Two yellow eyes of a strange animal were staring directly at her. She knew a lot of animals but this creature was foreign to her.

With a mixture of curiosity and fear she slowly inched closer to observe it. The animal didn't back away, ignored her even. It wasn't large; it had black velvety fur, two little pointy ears and a tail. Oh exciting! Her heart beat quicker the closer she came to the animal. She knelt down next to it, tilted her head, and smiled into the eyes of the animal.

"Will you be my friend? You look nice."

She reached out to touch its soft fur, but before she could even touch it, the creature swiped its paw and scratched her across the cheek with its sharp claws. Hissing, it then turned and run away, into the thicket of the woods. Eyes wide, she fell backward on the leafed ground. Her right cheek burned like fire, and upon touching it, she noticed it was bleeding.

Tears welled into her eyes and ran down her face, which only made the deep scratch burn more.
Hugging her knees, she started to sob bitterly. How stupid of her to run so deep into the woods on her own! Ashalle was going to be so angry with her for this, and she would be all alone with no one loving her anymore!

“What are you doing here?” a boyish voice asked, nearly drown out by the sound of her crying. “Th-there w-was an evil anim-animal,” she managed between the sobs, tears blinding her eyes.

“You mean the black one?” Nodding, she blinked quickly to clear her eyes and raised her head to look at him. He had ash-blonde, tousled hair and freckles within his pale face. It was a boy of her clan, she had seen often before but rarely talked with, so far.

"It is called cat," he explained. "I have seen it here a few times. The Keeper said that there are sometimes animals of the shemlen strolling around in the forest. It probably ran away from them.” He looked down to her and frowned. "Hey, you are bleeding!" The boy searched in his pocket and handed her a slightly dirtied handkerchief. "Take this."

"Ma serannas." She winced as she pressed the cloth on the scratch. Cats were horrible animals, but the boy seemed to be nice. "What is your name?"

"Tamlen. I'm six years old and will be a great hunter one day." He stretched himself and swung the stick in his hands. "I was hunting animals here!"

Lenya crossed her arms. "You should have hunted the cat then!"

Tamlen nodded. "Next time. We can do it together!" Helping her back on her feet, he frowned at her. "I have seen you a lot, but I don't remember your name."

"I'm Lenya." She sniffled, her tone defiant. "I'm four years old, but I'm already a big girl. Ashalle said that."

"Lenya? That is a nice name..."

She smiled at him. Suddenly, her burning cheek wasn't that bad anymore. "Will you be my friend?"

"Yes," Tamlen said, and took her hand. "Let's go back to our camp."

Awoken from the Beyond, Lenya gasped for air and quickly blinked the remnants of the dream away. Why this memory? Why now? It must have been this damn demon disguised as a cat in Honnleath that conjured these pictures back into her mind. Heart in her throat, she sat up and let her head sink into her hands. Even if it hadn't been a nightmare, her forehead was clammy with cold sweat. The prior innocent memory hurt, was squeezing her insides in a tight grip. She hated her mind for its insistence to keep bringing him up, when all she wanted was to lock down the memories of him forever.

"Of course it does," a smug voice ringing through her head told her, unbidden, since you are to blame for his death.

"Shut up!" Lenya yelled, startled by the volume of her own voice. She inhaled sharply, quickly lifted her head to glance left and right. No reaction from the others followed upon her outburst, and the silence in the half-dark of dawn lingered. She must have tossed and turned, since her bedroll and furs were at the other end of her small tent and she sat on the verdant ground. The coolness of the grass beneath herself was a stark contrast to her heated body. The loose linen shirt clang to her skin in places and sweaty strands of hair stuck to her cheeks. Wiping them away, Lenya grimaced
before letting out a resigned sigh.

So much for a good, long rest.

She looked up, noting the first, faint rays of daylight splaying across the thin canvas of her tent. The exhaustion chilled her bones as much as the gush of wind hitting her sweat-damp skin did. With a groan she searched her backpack for her soap, a fresh shirt and linen cloth and crawled out her tent, hating everything.

The grassy hills surrounding the camp were slowly losing the gray of night and regaining their colors, like the leaves of the trees framing the purling stream she reached after a short, unwilling trek. Looking up, Lenya scowled at the dawn sun peeking through a hazy screen of clouds, which painted the sky an elaborate mix of bloodied reds and vibrant oranges. Early mornings were the worst. In general and even more so after a restless night. Even Revas refused to trail after her and instead flopped over to continue sleeping.

Lenya wished she could do the same but alas – oh no. Feeling the telltale scream of him in her head, she stopped in her tracks. The pull of taint, was less pronounced and nauseating as when encountering darkspawn, yet still annoying. And it wasn't only that, no. She could also hear faint sobbing coming from his direction. The human – Alistair – was crying again and she was more than ill-equipped, nor willing to deal with that, especially right now. Lenya turned on her heels. Maybe, if she would just quietly –

"Lenya?" She grimaced upon hearing her name called out. Well, the pull of taint worked both ways, so it shouldn't surprise her that he was aware of her presence. And still, her mind raced with excuses and ways to get the fuck out of there and away from him. It wasn't exactly her business, nor her job to console that human. Instinctively, her eyes searched for a larger sized stone on the ground, even before she became aware of doing so. Ah yes, the good ol' knock him out and run approach, she had thought about so often, but never ended up trying. Perhaps today would be a good first–

He cleared his throat, drew in some hasty gulps of air. "W-what are you doing here?"

"Leaving now," she muttered, but something in his voice kept her from following through with her words. She turned around to him with a sigh. He sat hunched over with his back against the trunk of an old birch. Delicate green leaves spread out in a nature's roof above and its cracked bark was silvery in places, like halla fur. There was a fragrance here, a distinctive aroma of leaves and soil, seizing her heart with a pang of melancholy. The ground, soft soil and lumpy with the tree's thick roots looked far too inviting to her all the sudden.

Lenya swallowed and waited for the slight tremble within her knees to pass before finally addressing him. "This is the only source of water close by, so it should obvious what I am doing here, idiot."

"Fishing?" he asked, but it lacked his usual humorous tone.

"Yes puppy, fishing." Lenya rolled her eyes as she approached him further. No point in running away anymore. "Because I love nothing more than to get up in the ass of dawn and stare at water."

"I'm pretty sure fishing doesn't work that way," Alistair quipped, but his heart wasn't in it. His eyes
were still glistening with tears, even after he wiped at them in haste, ashamed. "Sorry, not in the mood for jokes right now. I didn't expect anyone to be up yet, so -" He left the words hanging and swallowed, still not looking up to her. "I'll get out of your hair. You surely want to... err, fish in peace."

"What is that?" Sprawled on last seasons leaf litter next to him lay a... letter? Lenya frowned, seeing that the paper was crinkled, as if crumpled up and straightened out again right after. Alistair reached for it, but she was quicker in picking it up and started to read. The handwriting was scrawled, the sentences choppy, as if hastily written.

My detour through the Brecilian Forest has led me to a Dalish camp. I have found the needed recruit there. A Dalish who came into contact with a tainted mirror. Longer story. Now we are now on our way back to Ostagar. Arrival is estimated in a few days. In time for the upcoming battle anyhow. Do already arrange the preparations for the Joining. Utmost important that we have to do the ritual quickly after our arrival.

Duncan, Warden Commander Of Ferelden.

The Warden leader shem, of course. Now the flaring up of Alistair's grief and behavior made so much sense. Because finding a letter from him or anyone of her clan would also – Lenya exhaled and pressed her eyes shut for a second or two, urging the rush of sorrow back down.

"I didn't know that I still had it," he whispered more than spoke. "Junan – a fellow Warden – gave it to me in, in - " He closed his eyes, suppressed a whimper. "A couple of days before you arrived with Duncan. Said I should hold onto the letter..." Alistair scoffed. "... guess I really did, huh?"

Not knowing what to say, Lenya only nodded. "Of course," he added, attempting a small smile that fell flat. "When you arrived you were not quite what we expected you to be, nor I, for that matter."

"What is this supposed to mean?" she bristled, stemmed her hands into her hips. "If you start talking like that damn Qunari and telling me that women can't fight I'll will dunk your hea-"

"N-no, Maker. Not that." He rose his both hands to placate, but quickly lowered his right one with a hiss of pain. "You are obviously very capable, but women are – were – pretty rare in our ranks, at least at the time where - " Alistair words faded into a sigh and he let himself fall back onto the leafed tapestry, all intent on leaving gone. "Which is why we expected a guy."

Lenya remained standing, crossing her arms. "Yeah, I was not exactly there by choice, puppy."

"The many times you tried to escape from Duncan to run back to your clan made that obvious, believe me," he said, short-lived amusement in his voice. Then he looked up to her and the warmth found within his eyes... was unnerving. "But you haven't tried doing so ever since, well, that happened. Thank you."

"Yeah..." she muttered, looking away. "Guess I'm stuck here now, ugh."

"I'm glad," he said by a way, shrugging with his healthy shoulder. "Since you are a good person, Lenya. Even if you want to make everyone believe that you are not."

"Hmpf," she scoffed, glaring at the water of the stream. "You don't know me, shem."
"Right..." His gaze burned at the side of her face and her ear started to slightly twitch. "But I would like to."

Ugh, this human. Maddening. Her head whipped around to him, her glare shifted to him. "Why? Why though? I'm not here to make friends or coddle you, human. I am here to survive... whatever that is."

"Because I'm stuck here now, too." The corner of his mouth twitched upwards. Wasn't he inconsolable about the Warden shem just moments ago? "And... we are fellow Wardens, right?"

"Unfortunately, yes," she snapped, sharper than meant.

"Ouch. Beat him when he is down, huh?" He slowly got up, the whole motion a bit more ponderous than usual. "Well, probably my sign to leave you alone, my fellow Warden."

"You wanna talk about the Warden -err- Duncan?" What the fuck are you doing, self? Scowling at her own words, Alistair stopped in his tracks.

"What?" Turning back to her, he frowned. "Why?"

"Ugh I don't know." She really didn't. "You just looked like as if you wanted to talk about that... shem."

"And you would listen? Voluntarily?" Alistair laughed out loud. "Are you sure you didn't hit your head, back in Honnleath?"

"Ugh." Lenya grimaced, finally snapping out of whatever strange impulse she was under. She started to move away. "Forget I asked."

"N-no, wait, Lenya." He let out an annoyed groan; directed at himself, it seemed. Rightfully, so. "I'm good in putting the foot in my mouth, aren't I? I didn't mean to make fun of you. It is simply a surprising offer from you, but one made in kind. I'm sorry."

"Fine," she said, plopping down on the ground. "Then talk, human."

He stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. "You don't have to do this, if you don't want to. After all you didn't know, nor even liked Duncan."

Yes, but if it stops your whining... Lenya winced at her own thought, too harsh for her own taste. Annoying as he could be, he deserved better than this. "True." She nodded, settled for something much milder. "But you did, right?"

"Yes." The word was drawn out and pronounced with hurt kept too long inside. It was the kind known to her, far better than wanted. This had been a terrible, terrible idea. Leaning against the tree, he remained standing; probably not trusting himself to get back up once more with his injury. "He was my mentor. This may sound stupid to you, but part of me wishes I were there, with him. In the battle." He exhaled, shakily. "I feel like I have abandoned him."

A really, really terrible idea, indeed. Lenya tensed, her fingers clawed at the grass and soft soil beneath for purchase. His words sent her head spinning, hitting her in the worst way possible. Each syllable of it was dizzying, nauseating and throat-constricting, making it hard to speak or breathe. Pressing her eyes shut, she counted downward from ten to zero, grasping for something that wasn't her own regret mirrored there. "It is not... stupid," she managed at the number zero, at last. "I... understand completely."
"Of course, I would be dead then," he mused, his voice cracking. "It is not that would have made him happier."

Tamlen. Lenya rarely allowed herself to think of his name, but here it flared up in her mind too quickly to suppress it. She would have died, should have, along with him, or rather instead of him.

Your fault.

Her fingers dug in the earth, ripped out pieces of grass and soil, as if doing so could alleviate their combined survivor's guilt. It did little to banish the tension and hurt gnawing at her insides, the feeling lingered. At least her breathing evened out, with focusing more on her hands, the mooring effect of her motions. When Lenya opened her eyes again, she found his gaze lingering upon her face, silent but observing. She suppressed the need to flinch under his stare. His eyes were never cold and always seemed to grasp too much of herself with a single glance. It was unnerving. She turned her head away, which he took as a signal to continue speaking, after clearing his throat.

"I'd like to have a proper funeral for him, once all this is done." He sighed, his voice low and sad. "If we are still alive. I don't know." Without meaning to, they exchanged a look, mutually aware of this impossibility, given what they were up against. The corner of his mouth lifted to a small smile, but it remained brittle and was quickly gone again. He tilted his head. "The Dalish don't practice cremation, do they? How do your people honor the dead?"

Swiftly do stars burn a path across the sky, Hast'ning to place one last kiss upon your eye.

"How do you know this, human?"

"Well, there is only so much praying you can do growing up in the Chantry without going insane. Thankfully, they had a lot of books. So I read a lot, sought out knowledge beyond the Chant, even beyond what the Chantry deemed appropriate or important to learn." He let out a snort, lips pursed to a lopsided grin. "Don't tell Morrigan though, I have a reputation to uphold."

Lenya laughed out loud, easy and clear. It was genuine amusement about his subtle joke, instead of annoyance. No one was more surprised about it than herself. Her eyes upwards, she shrugged. "You are many things, but not stupid, Alistair." She heard him exhale, louder than usual. Dawn red had turned into a hazy blue above. The horizon was brighter now than before, despite the clouds obscuring the sun. Some of that pink that had vanished from the sky seemed to have wandered into his cheeks as she looked back up at him. What an odd human. Then she remembered that he'd posed a question, and she decided to reply to it truthfully. "We bury our dead and plant trees over their bodies."

"That sounds quite beautiful. Life springing from death."

It was the softness of his voice, the genuine amazement audible within his words that got her. Tears shot into her eyes and blurred her sight, even before her muddied hand could catch the gasp escaping her mouth. Lenya used her back as a protective wall between him and herself, turned it toward him, as she crumbled.

Tenderly land enfolds you in slumber, softening the rolling thunder.

The heady remembrance of the incense burned in her nose and Paivel's word recited on that day rang through her mind. They did bury him too, said goodbye, but there was no body.

Dagger now sheathed, bow no longer tense. During this, your last hour, only silence.

His grave was empty, the ritual just a farce. He died alone, forgotten. It should have been me.
Her shoulders trembled and her whole body followed suit, wrecking her with silent sobs.

*It should have been me.*

"You have lost someone too." It wasn't a question. She felt him looming behind and over her, as if unsure to give space or comfort. His hand brushed awkwardly over the back of her head and down the tousled mess of hair, almost like he was petting a dog. The warmth of his hand settled on her shoulder then, giving it a slight squeeze. He let it rest there.

The gesture was oddly calming, enough for allowing her to speak again. "Please... leave me alone." Alistair hummed softly and withdrew his hand to heed her wish. The hitch in his distancing steps was giving away his reluctance to do so. Even in his absence, the warmth of his touch on her shoulder lingered.

Later that day, they made halt in Merinwood once more, but it became quickly clear that their presence wasn't wished there any longer. And before Lenya could murderstab the owner of the inn refusing to rent to 'knife-ears and malificars', they opted to make camp in the village's outskirts instead. In this way, they still had access to their resources in exchange for coin, without having to resort to murder. Not that Alistair would have minded... *much* in this case, after the undisguised disdain shown toward his fellow Warden for not being human and not grovelling at the owner's feet like he was clearly used to from elves. It would all have been simply so terribly, *terribly* inconvenient with all the blood and guts and -

"I have never heard of such a thing called a Qunari," Shale's booming voice brought him back to the here and now; a quiet afternoon in camp, a few days later. The golem was standing next to a kneeling Sten, who sharpened his greatsword with a whetstone in long, measured strokes.

"Then you have not been listening." The Qunari shook his head, without looking up. "We did not row to shore last year. We have been about for centuries."

"I have listened." The stone of its shoulders creaked, as Shale heaved them to a shrug. "I have done little else, in fact, and yet I do not remember anyone mentioning such a Qunari in all my years in the village."

Unsurprising," Sten scoffed, while glaring the small nicks in his blade into submission. "Relying on humans as a source of education is a fool's errand."

"They are rather ignorant, aren't they?" The golem laughed out loud, a hollow sound. It clearly enjoyed the direction of the conversation. "And feeble. At the best of times."

"Hey, hey... Lenya." Alistair shifted his attention back to his fellow Warden standing in front of him. The freckles dusted around her nose and cheeks moved as she frowned in concentration at his shoulder. The last time she was so close to him, he was in too much pain and the surroundings too dark to notice that detail of her face. Weird that he did so now, though. "You are missing out on joining the we-hate-humans club over there."

"Shht," she warned him, but he saw the upturn quirk of her lip while she cut and removed each thread of his stitched wound with precision. It had healed quicker than even he had thought and as such, the threads keeping it together weren't needed any longer.
"Ah, I see," he teased, trying to look anywhere that wasn't the intense green of her eyes. "You want to listen what they are saying, right?"

"We have creatures on Par Vollen that are similar. The humans call them 'monkeys,'" Sten said. "They are dull, cowardly vermin. They cry out shrilly when threatened and throw their own feces."

Lenya let out a snort at that, quite boisterous and unladylike, but it fitted her. She momentarily ceased her work to eavesdrop on the rest of their companion's conversation.

"That is an excellent comparison," Shale agreed. "I wonder if they are related?"

"Possibly," the Qunari replied and the easy, metallic scraping sound picked up in volume again. Their talk was finished. Lenya turned around to dip her fingers into the mortar with the elfroot salve, placed on the unoccupied log next to him, and was still grinning when she started to apply it on his skin.

"Yeah, I thought you would like that." There was a cool professionalism to her touch, but her fingers were still warm and... a bit distracting. It was a foreign sensation for him to be touched; especially skin upon skin contact, with all the armor he usually wore. Better to not think about that. Alistair cleared his throat.

"Now we have two murderous giants, a witch of the wilds and a lay sister with visions of the Maker. What is next?" he mused, more to divert himself than with any sense and purpose. "Maybe a clown throwing knives who is trying to murder us first, before joining our cause? He would fit right in, that is for sure."

Lenya bestowed his squall of words with her usual annoyed groan. The familiarity of her reaction settled warm and fuzzy in his stomach as a satisfying feeling. He knew she would respond in this way, it was one of the very few things about her that were certain. Many others remained a mystery. She wrapped a fresh bandage around his shoulder and arm, and finished it off with knotting the ends. "Do you think the wound will leave a scar?" he asked, voice low and amused. "I heard women like that." He winced right after the words were spoken. Maker what was he doing?

Her eyes trailed over his chest with the same cool detachment. He still felt bare in more than one way under her stare and his hand moved to cover up his small belly. No matter how hard he trained, a bit of softness there remained. It seemed he'd only managed to develop muscles around his center, but not within. Not fully, anyhow. "You already have many scars, that is true." Looking back up at him, she shrugged. "But so have I. It is nothing special."

Wait, she had many scars? There was a faint white line curving upwards on her cheek, but many? Where were the other ones? Why did he even want to know? Ugh, it was about time that they would break up camp and move on. He was going stir-crazy in camp without being able to physically exhaust himself in training sessions or battle. He fully expected himself to sit in between the senior village women and men to gossip along with them any time soon. "Have you decided where to go next, for the treaties?"

Not replying, her fingers slid down from the shoulder to his bicep and prodded the muscle there. "Ouch." He gave her a dubious look. "What are you doing?"

Lenya let go off his arm. "No nerve damage then, good."

Alistair opened and closed his hand in quick succession, amazed that the motion no longer painfully tugged at his shoulder. "Wow, you really know your stuff, huh?"
"I had to learn this. Hunting is dangerous," she admitted with a small smile and shrug of her shoulder. "Also got into a lot of trouble and fights." Oh, this he believed without a doubt. Her green eyes fixed his face, narrowed a bit. "Why are you asking me about the treaties? You are the Grey Warden here, human."

"What?" Alistair arched an eyebrow at her, and watched her as she cleaned the leftover salve from her hands with his water-skin. It tinged the air around him with the elfroot's sweet smell. "Don't tell me you have already forgotten the part where you drank some blood and passed out?"

Lenya made a frustrated noise at the back of her throat. "Yes, the supposed cure for being tainted was consuming more taint. Genius, really. How could I ever forget that?"

"That is not how this-" He stopped, decided to not rise to her blithely bait. Bending over to pick up his discarded shirt from the ground, he pulled it over his head and welcomed the warmth it provided. With the evening and descending sun also came the chill of night. Plus, this was Ferelden. "Then why did you call me the Grey Warden?"

She regarded him coolly. "You are one much longer than me."

"By whole six months, thank you very much. I'm not exactly a senior Warden in any sense of this word." Alistair hesitated, his tongue heavy with the admission needed to be made. "Besides, I'm no leader, Lenya. I'd prefer to follow."

"Oh really?" Lenya sneered, stemming her hands into her sides. "Well, I'd prefer to not do any of this. I'd prefer to follow my clan and leave Ferelden behind." She stressed each word, plowed them forward with more and more velocity and volume. "But I don't get to do this, why should you? In case you haven't noticed yet, this isn't some pick and choose situation. So get over it, shem."

Back to shem, are we? Anger flared, rumbled like a distant beast inside of him. Why was it always him who needed to compromise? The figurative eggshells he walked on around her most of the time threatened to break under frustration mounting. "You are not really a person that follows orders, Lenya." He released a breath he'd been withholding and stared straight at her. "And you were already leading, making decisions all the time before. Why is it now a problem all the sudden, when I bring it up?"

She angrily poked the flames of the campfire with a stick, sending sparks flying in the air. How very symbolic. "Because you make it fucking easy for yourself that way, shem. All the decisions and responsibilities? Hey just let the stupid Dalish do that for me! Groveling like a good elf should, right?"

"That was not what I was saying and you know that!" Around him, everyone had ceased their activity to stare at them, him. His surroundings had grown silent, save for his heartbeat turning into a warning thrum in his ears. He was hanging on the last threads of his patience. Again she'd twisted his words and spat them out as something wholly foreign. Why did she always do that? Why this need for constant confrontation? It was... tiring. Not wanting to repeat the perpetual cycle again, he tried a final time, voice soft. "I'm still here, Lenya. I'm not going anywhere."

She didn't answer. Wrapped in layers of armor, both literal and figurative, her expression was unyielding, frozen in a scowl. The sparks of the campfire rising up seemed to submerge into her, fueling her ire. Lenya slanted her head, narrowed eyes trained on him. Each word was clipped and calculated, cutting him with the precision her blades did in battle. "And just how is this a good thing?"

"That is not fair," Alistair protested, the hurt blooming like liquid fire in his guts. She probably
knew it wasn't as well, though for now her temper and stubbornness overrode this knowledge. Or worse, she really did not care, but no, she wasn't like that. She wasn't cold and callous, the various small moments spent with her made it obvious. Still, she could be Maker-damned frustrating, to the point where he wondered why Duncan had-

"Life isn't either." The stick made a resounding crack as she broke it over her knee and threw it into the fire. "Get used to it," Lenya added with an indignant huff and stormed away.

"How is this helping to fight the Blight?"

"You tell me, Qunari." Not even stopping once, she shoved Sten aside and disappeared in between the treelines.

"It has some anger issues, hasn't It?" Shale laughed. "I hope It takes it out on the birds pestering these trees."

From his distanced position, Sten scowled over at Alistair. "You have to control your woman better. She is unreasonable."

Did he hear that right? "Excuse me?" Alistair bristled, anger shifting to the Qunari. Before he could speak further however, Morrigan fell into his words.

"You are a fool if you believe you can put her into her place, or..." She pointed at Alistair, her tone pure distaste. ".that she belongs to this imbecile."

"Is she no Grey Warden, then?" There was genuine confusion within the words laced with irritation. "She dresses up like one in the armor and pretends to be a man. It doesn't make any sense, and her irrationality shows that."

"She is a woman and she fights. Same as I!" Clasping her book shut, she glared into the Qunari's direction. It was surprising that the self-centered, aloof witch made the effort to stand up for Lenya. But it was less about her than Sten's narrow point of view that got a raise out of Morrigan, wasn't it? It was quite insulting himself and it must have been tenfold so for his female companions. "Do not be such a blind fool. You can see women throughout this land, fighters and mages both."

"That has yet to be proven," he scoffed, mirroring her glare.

"Which?" Her voice was clipped, seething with barely contained rage. "That they fight? Or that they are female?"

"Either."

"So I am not truly a woman to you?" Regarding him with haughty disapproval, Morrigan made a quick tsk behind her teeth. "Hmm. 'Tis good to know." She turned away from the Qunari and picked up her discarded book to resume reading. The issue still hang unresolved between them and over the whole camp, in fact. For her the discussion was not longer worth her attention, however.

"No one has a place here. No one is content with who they are. There is no order, nor discipline," Sten groused, shaking his head with a disgusted noise. "No wonder we had conquered so much of your lands so quickly."

"Well, that was bracing." Leliana approached the center of their camp from behind Alistair, carrying a bundle of sticks and thicker branches within her arms. Trailing behind her, Revas pulled a bough twice as long as his own body in his muzzle after himself. He showed a doggy grin and his
stumpy tail wagged, fully enjoying this task. The mabari spat the branch out near Alistair's feet and lay down to gnaw on it. Leliana piled the newly collected bundle on top the few branches left, next to the campfire. This should last them through the night. She peered over her shoulder, back at him. "Is everything alright, Alistair?"

He let his head sink into his left hands and squeezed his eyes with two of his fingers. "No. It isn't." Alistair replied in honest, and swallowed. "I feel everything is falling apart before it has even started."

He heard a clang as the rest of the wood fell to the ground. Sitting down next to him, she lay her arm around his shoulder and hugged him in a friendly, supportive way. "This all is a lot to take in, I understand. For you." She paused for a moment. "And her. I do not fault you for doubting, but it would be wrong to give up your chosen path. The Maker - "

"Chosen?" Alistair cut her off, head snapping up to scowl at her. "None of it is chosen, Leliana. It should have never happened in the first place." If only Duncan were here. Tears welled up behind his eyelids. He blinked fast to keep them at bay, but grief already had claimed his heart and rocked his body with soundless sobs. "I'm sorry. I should handle this better. Anyone can die in battle. Duncan warned me about it from the start. I shouldn't -" Alistair raised his hand to shield his forehead and eyes, didn't want her – or anyone – to see him sobbing yet again. Would it ever stop? Be better?

"Hey, there is nothing to be sorry about," Leliana said softly and shushed him as one might shush a child. They sat for a bit in silence, her fingers squeezed his left shoulder in comfort while he gasped through stuttering bouts of air.

"Huh, It is leaking again," Shale said, meaning him crying. "It does little else, I noticed."

"Shale, not now, please."

But the golem ignored Leliana's request and plowed on, words heavy like its approaching steps. "For one who professes to be a warrior, I find It remarkably weak-willed and indecisive." The golem seemed to have come to a stop at Leliana's side, its presence looming over them. "It also likes to hide its many weaknesses behind a veil of jocularity."

"I heard what It said. With all the yelling was impossible not to." The white light – lava? – slit the creature had for eyes added to its cold stare. "Is there a reason it enjoys following others so much? Especially when it is in a position to lead?"

"Have you ever been responsible for someone else's life? Or a lot of other lives? Or an entire nation?"

The golem shook its head. "Of course not!"

Alistair jumped up, making himself taller in front of the massive creature. His jaw clenched, along with his fist, words forced out through gritted teeth. "Then. Shut. Up!"

Pah," it scoffed, regarding him with indifference rather than something to be crushed. Oh good. His life went him by right after his outburst, awaiting certain death by maiming. "I will remember this moment when the birds come." Turning, Shale stomped away, returning to its place near to the Qunari's tent and Bodahn's cart.
"Yelling at the moody golem?" Leliana arched an eyebrow at him. "Not sure if I should be impressed or scolding you for this."

"Yes well," Alistair made a face, turning his expression into pure chagrin. "I'm not exactly known for making good and sound decisions. ...Not that there had been many in my life so far," he muttered under his breath.

"Oh? How come?"

"This is a story for another time, Leliana." He made a face. "I believe I have whined enough into your ears for one night."

"Aww, it is adorable, in a way," Leliana said, smirking. "Like a puppy that is vying for attention with yipping in one's ear." *Wait is this why Lenya calls me 'puppy'? Ugh.* There was a new distaste for this nickname under the new perspective for him. "I was joking, Alistair," she assured him, mistaking his reaction. "You have every right to complain. What you do, both of you do, isn't easy. But you are not alone. We are here along the way, to help you."

"Yeah, at least until we all start murder each other, because we are getting along so well." He shot her a sarcastic glance, wrapped himself into the comfort of his humor again. "But I like you Leliana... as a friend," he felt obliged to add, blushing a bit. "So I would give you a heads up before I would run up and try to slaughter everyone." Huh, that sounded really really creepy. Alistair pursed his lips, Great, another joke gone wrong. He was becoming an expert in these kinds.

"You think I'd need a head-up?" She broke into a wry smile. "That is cute, but unnecessary."

"Just a lay sister, huh?" he snorted, poking her shoulder. "I'm onto you and your dark secrets, dear lady!" Wait, did Leliana flinch at that? He checked her expression for another moment and clue, but it was trained back into friendly neutrality. Huh.

"Now, I was able to secure us freshly farmed vegetable from the village, enough for a filling stew, " she said a bit too loudly, clasped her hands on her knees and got up from her seat. His eyes narrowed briefly at her unnatural reaction, suspicion pin-pricking the back of his head. Leliana smiled at him. "Do you want to help me cook?"

Alistair shook the feeling off. It was probably nothing. And if she indeed planned to murder them all in their sleep, it was good to know that it would be quick and painless. Since she was very capable with bow and knife and all. ...Wow, was this their new standard for companions now? After letting Sten, a literal murderer of children and a bloodthirsty, uncontrollable golem trail along, this indeed seemed to be the case. Yeah, beggars couldn't be choosers, but *wow.* At this rate, the knife-throwing clown would not stay a joke for long. "That depends. Do you want it to be still editable afterwards?" he asked in return, grinning.

She threw him a knowing look. "I trust you enough to be capable to cut vegetable and fetch water, really."

"Hmm," Alistair hummed. Perhaps a menial task could get his mind off things. It was better than to continue sitting here and moping; about his fight with Lenya, and, well, everything else.

"Alright. I'll get the water, then."

Later that evening, he was busying himself with reading a book he'd bought off Bodahn's cart for a copper coin. Unfortunately, its low price equaled its quality, but it was still better than staring at
shadowed trees at the camp's border, waiting for Lenya's return. After all, it was her who continued to run away from any kind of conflict. Not without prior flinging unfounded accusations and insults into his direction, of course. *I'm not apologizing this time.* He had no reason to, anyway.

The book was the usual tale of a village boy stumbling into bigger than life adventures and coming out of them a man and beloved hero. Alistair huffed at a particular cheesy line of the main character, which let his female sidekick swoon into his arms. This book made it look so easy. The author clearly had no idea how unglamorous any of it was. The fighting, the blood, the smells, and the stubborn, infuriating female companion. Okay, now where by Andraste's mercy was she even? Her presence no longer resonated within his blood, which was... slightly concerning.

Alistair lowered his book to catch a glance toward the trees; just very briefly, thank you very much. Nonetheless, his eyes lingered where she’d vanished, teeth worn at his lower lip. It was probably nothing and she could take care of herself either way. Shaking his head, his eyes rest on the hound lying at his feet. Revas perked up not a moment later, reacting to something in the distance. Alistair peered into the darkness. Nothing. At first, anyway. He reached up to scratch the itch at the back of his head, but it came from inside of his skull, like the tug at his guts. Ah. There she was, still alive, appearing as flash of blonde in the distance. Good. Now he could go back to ignoring her.

"Hey..." She approached him and he gripped the book harder, forced himself to not acknowledge her. *Not this time, Lenya.* A bit breathless, she sighed out loud, a tremble audible within. "Fine, be that way, puppy." Whirling, she stalked away and Alistair let out a breath, once she was out of earshot. Though with her being elvhen, it was nigh impossible to gauge the distance needed for that. He snorted, grinning to himself. *I bet she can hear a squirrel farting in the woods.*

Her return a few minutes later was... unexpected. Even more so that she plopped down right next to him. So close that her armored thigh was nudging his clothed one, invading his space. She radiated heat, the wisps of it were hot against his own skin. Traces of the armor polish's smell clung to her skin; metallic tang mixed with the sweet of soap and something else entirely. Damn it. He was reading the same line now for the third time. She heaved another sigh, increased in volume, like a child waiting to be acknowledged. Completely unlike a child, she then stretched each of her limbs beside him, taking up more and more space on the shared, upturned log. How was he supposed to ignore that? The written words danced and swam before his eyes, became all a jumble through her proximity and warmth. Maker. Instead of looking up from his book, Alistair stared harder at it. *Not this time, Lenya.*

Done with arms and legs now, Lenya rolled her shoulders and commented each pop of her joints with a soft exhale, akin to a moan. Pressing his lips and eyes together, he lowered the book, admitting defeat. Or maybe not, if he only stole a glance to see what her deal was, this didn't count, right? This behavior was so out of character for what little he know of her, he might as well check if there were any bumps forming at the back of her head. It was only fair. She was his fellow Warden and a personality-changing head wound would be bad... probably.

He looked and there were no injuries, no visible ones anyway. Still, sweaty strands of blonde hair stuck to her head like a second skin. Freckles trailed down from her cheek to her chin, disappearing
under the protective collar of her Warden armor. Her ear twitched briefly, its pointed tip flushed like the nape of her neck and cheeks. What had she been doing, out there?

Lenya turned her head and he froze, mortified by her noticing him staring. Well, it wasn't really staring *staring*, more like checking that she was okay, right? It was pure concern for her well-being and no one could tell him otherwise. Her eyebrow rose further and further up, along with the quirk of her lips. "Got your attention, at last?"

Alistair blinked. Once, twice. His mind raced and yet was way too slow to catch up with the rest of him. The usual, then. "W-what?"

Lenya shrugged lightly and got back up on her feet. Away from his personal space, she sat down again on the ground and crossed her legs. Next to her, Revas flopped on his back, and wiggled around in the grass, like an over-sized worm. She patted his belly, which the mabari bestowed with satisfied doggy grunts. "I wanted to apologize."

"W-what?" Huh, he was repeating himself here.

"I have been too harsh, I guess."

Okay, who was this woman and what did she do with his fellow Warden?

"I'm stuck with you annoying human now. No way around it."

"T-thanks? I guess?" His eyes darted left and right, uncertain what to make of all this. "What were even you doing out there?"

"Running."

"Running?" he repeated and grimaced right after. *Ugh, stop it, brain. Keep up!*

"Clearing my head, more like." Indeed, she was very relaxed but also seems focused and all the other things she would hurt him for saying out loud. So he didn't and only nodded his acknowledgment of her explanation. Lenya unrolled a large parchments on the ground in front of her. "What are the options?"

"For what?" Oh, the parchment was... a map of Ferelden. *Oh. "For the treaties?"

She smiled sweetly at him. "No, for ways to murder you, if you keep asking stupid questions."

"Right. Not creepy at all." Coughing into his hand, he added, "We have treaties for the Dalish, dwarves and mages."

"The dwarves and mages. Got it." Lenya nodded and closed her eyes. Before he had the chance to comment on her omission of the treaty for her own people, she started to circle her finger over the whole map.

"What are you -"

After taking a few swirls, her finger dived down and landed in the midst of Frostback Mountain. "Leading," she said flatly, opening first one eye, then the other to peer down at her result.

"Leading?" Oh, Maker, not again. But how was he supposed to react to this? That woman constantly left him dumbfounded, even without trying.

"Are the *durgen'len* there?"
"Noooo," Alistair drawled, still busy with processing what just had happened. He had so many questions. "But if you want to say hello to the Avvar and get skewered in return, *that* is the place."

"Hmpf," she made, pursing her lips. "Okay, once again, then." Releasing her finger from the rejected mountains depicted on the map, she closed her eyes and let it circle over once more. This was getting ridiculous! Leaning forward, he caught her hand mid-air to stop her, and enclosed it with his palm. Shocked, her eyes flew open, in sync with his mind screaming at him how she wasn't wearing any gloves. Oh no. He was so dead. Dead, dead, dead. Goodbye world. He released his grasp on her hand immediately, as though it were clad in fire and burning him. Considering the heat rising within his cheeks and belly, it may as well did that.

Alistair blinked, glancing away. "Sorry." He let out an undignified whimper, while his cheeks fast approached egg-frying temperature. *Words. How do you... words?* His gaze fell back on the map and now he was the one pointing. "There..." He shook himself, maybe this would loosen up his tongue. It worked for Revas, after all. "We are here, approximately."

Lenya slanted her head, while still scowling at the hand he had been holding... *stopping* before. No hand holding there, nope. "Your grasp for the obvious is astounding."

He ran right into this one, didn't he? "No, I mean. We are here. And the dwarves for the treaty are in Orzammar... over there," he said, showing her the distance in between the two.

"Okay," she said so brightly that it sounded fake. "Orzammar, it is, then." Rolling up the map again, she got up in one fluid motion. "See, puppy, you can make decisions after all."

His mouth stood agape as he stared after her until she'd vanished into her tent. This, *this* had been her plan all along, hadn't it? Shaking his head, he laughed out in disbelief. Well, at least he got his wish. She had agreed to lead their group. Sort of. Whether or not this was a good thing remained to be seen, but it wouldn't be boring either way.

Chapter End Notes

Comments/Kudos are always appreciated. Lemme know what you think about this chapter :)


Chapter Summary

Seeking out the dwarves in Orzammar for their first treaty would be fine in itself, were the entrance not high up the mountain's peak and the weather totally miserable. But at least if gives Morrigan and Lenya the chance to bond over skinning animals and creative cooking, much to Alistair's dismay. And later in camp, Leliana finds a very effective method to divert Alistair's attention from having to talk about her background, who makes an interesting discovery afterwards.

Chapter Notes

Unbeta-d, yadda yadda, you know the drill. I fixed it to the best of my abilities. Enjoy nonetheless?

The problem with the dwarven treaty was reaching them, since Orzammar's entrance was built into the Frostback Mountains, near its peak. Her hood drawn deeply into her face to protect herself from the lashing wind and rain, Morrigan peered up at the mountains looming before them. They were even bigger and more magnificent than in all her dreams combined; the range of ice-crowned peaks nearly touched the cloudy sky. Awash with various shades of grey, rain continued to pour down from it for hours now. She didn't mind the weather as much as she did the effort and days needed to reach their destination. And, looking over her shoulder her admiring look shifted into a glare, of course the company.

"My boots are wet," the fool behind her complained anew, for the umpteenth time since this morning. "Actually everything of me is," he added in his most whiny voice that caused her fingers to curl to fists. Do not electrocute him, do not electrocute him. Ugh, it would be so easy to do, and the ensuing silence so rewarding. Alas, however insufferable, he was one of two remaining Wardens and thus needed for the greater scheme of things. Maybe she could at least zap him a little and blame it on the upcoming thunderstorm rumbling in the distance. She kept the imagery of it close, let it warm her heart, even as the temperatures dropped further with increasing altitude.

The Dalish – Lenya – endured the trek with more ease than the idiot. "I'll scout ahead," she announced, for at least the same amount of times the fool had spent complaining this day. Not even bothering with a cape or hood despite the rain, Lenya sped up and rushed past herself with quick, light steps. Morrigan arched an eyebrow at the oddly cheery demeanor of the Warden. Utilizing the momentum of her sprint, she jumped up at the small, rough overhang and pulled herself up to its surface in one fluid motion. Lenya did not stop upon her new elevated position to survey the area, however. Instead she broke into another sprint, ascending over aligned rocky boulders with well-timed jumps, before disappearing at a rocky outcrop up ahead. Morrigan huffed softly, but it hadn't its usual bite. Maybe she should simply transform herself into a raven and fly all the way up to its peak, or into a wolf, to be able to run with the Dalish. She was enjoying herself, unlike the miserable rest of their companions. Gritting her teeth, Morrigan pushed the thought aside. Twould
only result in having to wait for the others to catch up, though the ensuing silence would certainly be a benefit.

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Hours later and drenched to the bone, her mud-clad leather boots sloshed through the puddles that had collected on trampled down grass. The worn mountain path led to a valley, narrowed by moss and lichen covered boulders at each side. In between of the stone vegetation grew, sturdy firs and oaks as tall as the cold granite walls they passed earlier. Under their thickly dark green boughs framing and arching over the path, the harshness of the downfall was muted for a moment. Fat drops were beating out a fast rhythm on the branches and leaves overhead and strings of rain rushed down in a perpetual hiss, meeting the stone around them. The boom rolled across the valley, swallowing up Morrigan's murmur to conjure a wisp of light overhead to brighten the premature twilight. The wisp sparked to life overhead in the same moment the low crackle of thunder flashed across the sprawl of black clouds. With the aid of the light, Morrigan peered out into the distanced darkness. Lenya was once again far ahead of the group and had not returned yet. Revas at her side cocked his head and whined, probably thinking the same.

"We should search for a place to wait the storm out. The trees are not safe," the chantry twit said, frowning at the boughs of the trees swaying in the strengthening gust.

"Yes," the idiot Warden hissed, shaking far more than the cold permitted. He gritted his teeth, to stop them from chattering and glanced about. "What about -" Her appearance stopped his words before they could turn into whining once more, thankfully.

"Follow me," Lenya said, armor and hair drenched like the rest of them. She had the small hunting bow shouldered with a quiver and a few arrows secured at her hip, next to her usual blades. Without further words, the Dalish turned and led them past three mountain wolves bleeding out in a heap, toward a small cave still reeking of the animals.

Twas dark and cold inside and not exactly spacious. The golem scoffed upon seeing their destination and opted to stay outside. Not that the creature was given choice in this regard anyhow. The cave offered barely enough room for all of them, though it had to suffice for the duration of the storm. Nevertheless, Morrigan opted to stay standing at its entrance near the golem, just further under the rocky roof to be shielded from the downpour. Twas better than to be forced to huddle up with these morons by any means.

"Morrigan," Lenya addressed her in passing, already leaving again into the rain. "See if you can't start a fire. Within such a small cave this will be difficult due to the smoke it creates, but we need to warm up."

"Fine. Perhaps a fireball, then? Tis bound to warm them all up quickly." As predicted, the Dalish stopped and threw her an annoyed look over her shoulder. "Where are you going anyhow? Tis not the weather to frolic about in the mountains."

"I had to kill these animals for this shelter. To leave them rotting there is a waste and disrespectful toward nature and the hunt."

"You mean... Andruil?"

Her look shifted to one of confusion. "How do you know?"
"Mother had Dalish guests from time to time, when I was younger." The cave walls were rough and damp underneath her fingertips. The wetness emphasized the smell of mold and moss clinging to its cracked stones. Just like when she was younger, back in the Wilds. She had huddled up in a cave, smaller than this one by far and seeking shelter from a storm like they did now. How foolish she had been, to forget everything around herself, wasting time with playing or study animals. Still, the memory of it let a smile appear on her lips. "I was a nosy child, and asked them many questions."

"You were always one to seek knowledge then, I see," Lenya stated with a nod and in a matter of fact way that let Morrigan bristle.

"What?" Crossing her arms, she scoffed. "Tis better than to be force-fed useless knowledge like the chantry twit is preaching."

"Exactly." To her surprise, Lenya didn't hesitate to agree. "It is a good trait to be curious about the world, to question things." Her eyes strayed into the distance, "Even if my hahren would disagree..." The words were only mumbled, nearly lost to the rush of rain. Then, as if noticing and correcting her somber mood, she added more brightly, "And you got to see the mountains, Morrigan. Sorry about the weather, can't be helped."

"You seem very unbothered by it all, however."

"I'm Dalish." She shrugged, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. "My clan and I have already weathered worse."

Morrigan groaned, lips twisting in distaste. "Curse and damnation, don't tell me this idiot is rubbing off on you!"

"I can appreciate humor, you know." She laughed a little, and pointed at the idiot huddled in the corner with the other chantry imbecile. "The human however lacks the timing and taste for it."

"And wit."

Lenya shifted on her feet. "That is... your interpretation of things."

"One you don't share, then?" Ugh, that sounded more annoyed than she had intended to.

"Does it matter if I do?" There was an odd edge to the Dalish's voice that was probing, challenging.

"No, I don't have a care for that matter, nor the idiot in question," she only said in return, not rising to the bait.

"Good." The crack of thunder nearby and the rush of rain swallowed half of her words. "... I'll go," was all that remained audible, but it sufficed to kick Morrigan into action.

"Can I accompany you?" tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop herself. But in truth, it was better to be out in the storm than in their forced company.

"You ask to come with me?" Lenya regarded her with amusement in her voice, pointing at the heap of tawny fur and muscles lying curled at the Qunari's feet. The dog was sleeping, squeezing his large body between both warriors. "When even Revas cannot be bothered to keep me company?" She paused a moment in which Morrigan readied herself for rejection or mockery. None of which came, instead she surprised her once more. "Sure, I don't mind. Follow me, then."

Out in the rain they passed a row of boulders on the side. They were tall enough to tower over
them, but not to shield them from the weather, as the howl of wind lashed the rain through the crack of its stones. Three wolves lay in a heap, gray fur bloodied, turning the rain awash around them crimson. Arrows stuck out from the vital part of their bodies, indicating that Lenya managed to kill them before they were even aware of her presence. This was impressive, given their size and heightened senses. But the downpour must have hid her smell, something the Dalish knew and used to her advantage. A trained hunter, indeed. It was refreshing to be around someone knowledgeable in these matters; how to approach a wild animal without alerting it and striking at just the right moment to end the hunt before it had even begun. These were things that could only be learned to a point like Morrigan herself did in studying animals to imitate their nature. Though the bigger part of Lenya’s hunting prowess was instinct and couldn’t be learned by the less… gifted, no matter the dedication invested.

Framed by the downpour beating down on both of them, Lenya knelt down to three carcasses. Touching the fur of one of the wolves, she murmured foreign words near lost to the rain’s white noise. Not that Morrigan was capable to comprehend their meaning anyhow. A prayer, perhaps? Unlike the bard prattling on about some absentee father in the sky, this form of belief made much more sense to her. Lenya was honoring their death, their sacrifice, and showed respect for nature itself. As one should.

She loomed behind the Dalish, kept her distance until the last word was spoken. Intricate gestures followed, their meaning again unknown, but akin to rituals familiar to her. After that, Lenya turned around, in tune with the lightning flashing in the distance. She didn’t speak though her eyes held a silent command that Morrigan grasped in an instant. Unsheathing her skinning knife, she knelt down to the other carcass and began skinning the animal in unison with the Dalish. As expected, Lenya’s motions were as practiced and fluid in this task as her own, and together they made quick work in skinning the three animals.

A foul stench of rotten flesh wafted toward her after cutting open the wolves’ abdomen and Morrigan had to suppress gagging. Skinning predator animals was ungrateful, dirty work, especially when they had recently eaten. A lot of their meat was… simply not usable and what remained looked less than appetizing. “I hope you know how to cook this meat or ‘twill be an even more distasteful meal than the idiot’s cooking.”

“Wolves are not my favorites either,” Lenya replied and chuckled as if remembering a secret joke. “In my culture they are a bad omen and we prefer to stay away, nor actively hunt them.”

“This doesn’t answer my question,” Morrigan said with a scoff, raising her voice against the howl of wind.

The Dalish shrugged. “We came across quite a few over the years in the forest, however. Whole packs, in fact. So yes, while it isn’t easy to make their meat palatable, I know how.”

She’d not expected any less from her. “Good.”

After that brief exchange, they fell silent again. The rolling of thunder and steady drum of rain around them became the only sound. For as long she could remember, she’d asked herself what lay behind the borders of the Korcari Wilds, beyond these small villages with even more small-minded people. Now being actually here, in the mountains, turned out so very different to idle, idolized fantasy dreamed up over the past years. It was muddy, cold, her clothes drenched to the bones and the stench of wolf meat biting in her nose as she parted it from the guts. And yet, there was purpose here, beyond the bigger purpose imposed upon her by her mother. One of her own choosing, out here in the rain, with this odd Dalish Warden which company was… surprisingly enjoyable and preferable to the dry spot in the cave with all the other imbeciles.
Alistair threw a look toward the large pot hung low over glowing coals and grimaced. It was its content cooked overnight and bubbling inside that elicited this reaction. Collecting their pelt after slaying the wolves was one thing, but also processing their meat? If it tasted anything like it smelled upon brought back by Lenya yesterday, he’d rather take a bite out of the next darkspawn they encountered, thank you very much. Sure, they were running low on provisions since the gigantic Qunari easily could eat half a cow a day on his own... or in this case, half a bear. Not to mention his own Warden-induced appetite, but still standards, hello? Good for Lenya to be so crafty regarding their food sources and given her upbringing all but surprising, really. But there got to be a line somewhere. And right now it appeared to be at wolf meat, for him.

After the thunderstorm had passed, they made their way up to a rock plateau and seized the remaining daylight to set up camp there. Orzammar was still a day’s march away – if not more – so the rest here was welcomed before moving on further. His gaze fell upon the main campfire and the pile of mismatched clothes drying there nearby. The air was still humid from all the rain and bore the fresh tang of mud and grass. Which was nice, but didn’t exactly help his soaked underarmor to dry any faster. At this rate he’d have slipped back into still soggy clothes before breaking up camp. Great. Alistair heaved a sigh and snapped a twig in half to throw it into the dying flames. The campfire would need tending soon, though there was hardly any wood left. This morning shaped out to be very annoying, after an even shorter night spend sleeping upon rocky ground. No wonder his back protested every move now. Putting his armor back on would be a delightful experience, for sure.

“Mornin’,” Leliana said in between a yawn, emerging from her tent in the half-dark of dawn.

While Shale’s ever-wake presence was still new and unnerving, he was used to Leliana’s tendency to wake up as early as himself in the morning by now. Probably an habit brought on by spending their years in the chantry.

“Hey.” He greeted her with a nod, waited as she approached him. In between the rocks, the earth was sodden with rain, hence every step made a squelching sound beneath her boots. It was so loud in the silence of the darkness still clinging onto its last vestige. From the trees down below the path, mountain birds twittered their song, as if wanting to lure dawn out of its long sleep with their melodies. Maybe this was why the golem looked so annoyed, but with its expressionless face was hard to tell either way.

Passing the pot with the by now infamous wolf stew, Leliana wrinkled her nose. “Did you know the Dalish have a famous dish?”

Alistair let out a snort. “Other than cooking up any animal they come across, you mean?”

“Hmm, nothing against being...” Her gaze fell back on the pot. “... being resourceful.”

“Suuuuuure,” he drawled, amused. “You do remember the meat’s smell, right? Even the downpour yesterday wasn’t strong enough to wash it away.”

“All right, not everything tastes as bad as it smells, Alistair.” Aww, it was admirable how she defended Lenya’s foray into cooking all the wildlife that couldn't get away quickly enough from her. And this despite her own visible distaste. “Speaking of which... what was this... uniformly gray soup again you made for supper three days ago?”

"Oh that?” He smirked. "Ferelden Lamb and Pew Stew. Only with um, venison, I guess. Since
“And according to your words just now, you must have loved it, then. Because nothing tastes as bad as it looked, right?”

“Smelled,” she corrected him with a shake of her head. "And loving would be too strong a word. It was far too bland."

"At least it wasn’t wolf meat. "Aww, you wound me. Me and my ability to throw everything in a pot and cook it." He paused and then gasped for effect. "Like Lenya does. Huh, perhaps we can bond even further over our shared talent."

Leaning forward to warm her hands over the ember, Leliana rolled her eyes at him. This was nice, spending time with her like that. While every progress with his fellow Warden was hard-won and complicated, theirs was an easy companionship. “By the way, in case you are wondering... the famous Dalish dish is called ‘Dalish Deep Forest Comfort.’ “

“Why is it famous?”

“After discovering it, some nobles in Orlais adapted it into their cuisine, with some alterations, of course.”

“Why?” Great, here he was, repeating himself again.

A grin bloomed across her face. Oh uh. “Because the original recipe contained larvae of the wood-burrowing beetles. And a lot of them.”

“What? Eww. Why would anyone ever –“ He stopped, narrowing his eyes. “Wait, you are having me on, right?”

“Nope.” She giggled. “True story. It was all the rage in Orlais the summer before I... –“Leliana fell silent, all humor gone.

Alistair frowned. “Before you... what?”

She stared into the dying flames. “... returned to Ferelden.”

Ah. This. Her nebulous background she avoided talking about, maybe for good reasons. He shouldn’t pry and yet – “Yeah, about that... I have been thinking.” Curse that mouth of his. But now it was too late to retreat, wasn’t it?

Leliana perked up, turned to him again. “Oh?” It sounded uneasy.

“About what Morrigan said a few days back, of all things. That minstrels in Orlais are often spies. I heard the same.”

Even the dim light couldn’t hide the sudden tenseness of her posture, belying her nonchalant tone. “Who hasn’t? They’re quite famous, after all.”

The wind picked up and turned its direction, whipping damp air and the smell of the damn wolf meat into his face. He scowled. This... soon-to-be breakfast was nearly as bad as eating bugs. But Lenya didn’t like eating bugs, right? Or was it indeed part of her culture? He had to ask her. Someday. While being far far away from her. There was no need to risk death over this, really. For now, he focused back on Leliana, who probably could skewer him just as good and fast as Lenya for his curiosity. Oh well, nothing like danger in the morning going along a very likely distasteful meal. “Hmm, you see, the stories I heard were a little... racier. It had to do with how a bard assassinated her target.” His voice dipped lower, amused by his own implications she surely would
catch. At least he *hoped* she would, for having to actually explain it… would be awkward. “How they were... *lulled* into complacency.”

“If those stories were true, who would ever agree to entertain a bard in their court?” There was odd defensiveness coloring her tone, accented by the way her fingers dug into her arms she now had crossed.

Alistair slanted his head a little, eyes narrowing upon her for another reason now. What was she trying to hide… and why? If she really was a bard as Morrigan had taken a habit to call her lately, this would at least explain her abilities in battle. Nothing wrong with it, either. So why was she so evasive about it? Despite his curiosity turned suspicion, he kept his own voice light and playful. No need to push her any further into this very figurative corner. “Oh, I don't know, there's a certain allure to danger, isn’t there? And besides, you couldn't all be assassins, could you?” Pausing, he gauged for a reaction, a sign of affirmation, but Leliana simply waited for him to continue. She was not taking his bait. Okay, one more try then. "I'd take my chances. If the stories were true, that is.”

Instead of falling back into defensiveness like she did before, a sly grin appeared on her face. Her stance relaxed as well. “Oh, is this why you are so attracted to Lenya? She is quite an exciting woman, isn’t she? All mysterious and *dangerous*.”

What? “That’s not...” He sputtered, swallowing up the rest of his words in his haste to deny. His cheeks burned like Lenya’s leg did as it was touching his own a few nights back, sitting close. “N-no!” Alistair managed, screwing his eyes shut, head shaking. It helped little to stifle the churn of embarrassment, nor the sudden acceleration of his heartbeat. This was nonsense, just a deflection from Leliana, so he would get distracted and… it worked. Argh. Or else he wouldn't think about the press of Lenya’s dagger at his throat that night, urging him to leave, her gaze locking with his intense and reflecting the moonlight above. No, no, no. This was wrong. He shook his head again, forcing the thoughts away. *Nope, not going there, brain.* This was Leliana tricking him, and nothing more. Reopening his eyes, his exhale of air came out hitched. His cheeks felt more on fire than the actual campfire was, dying flames and all. He drove an erratic hand through his face and hair. Maker take him. “She is my fellow Warden, after all!” Alistair protested after another moment. Ugh, how weak that sounded, even to his own ears.

“That she is,” Leliana laughed under her breath and got up, way too amused. How he hated that telltale spring in her steps and the constant giggling as she left him behind in his misery for her own morning routine.

Sunlight streaked through the weave of clouds and roused more colors from their sleepy monochrome. Daylight now crept between every crevice of their rocky plateau, splaying over the mountain top and tent canvases alike. Closing his eyes, Alistair sat in the midst of their camp, still a bit sweaty from his brief morning work out.

Damp patches of grass and hard rock underneath him, he raised his head toward the sky and soaked up the warmth the late summer sun already offered. The mountain breeze enveloping his hulking form was cool but far less harsh than the wind lashing the rain into his face. This was nice, in spite of the turmoil caused by his companions rousing around him. The heavy footfalls belonged to either Shale or Sten marching up and down the small perimeters of camp, while the humming clearly was Leliana’s. Ugh, he preferred not to remember what happened a good hour ago between them, thank you very much. What a wily, evil bard. After that there was no chance in Thedas, she wasn’t one, not with all her tricks and… diversions. But why was it such –

“Don’t you have *anything* better to do, fool?”
Alistair startled at the sudden voice, his eyes flying open. Before him stood the second least person he wanted to see this morning and least person overall otherwise; Morrigan. With her hands stemmed into her sides, she regarded him with a cold sneer and a scowl that seemed etched into her features. At least whenever her eyes met him, that was. Well, this was finally something they could agree on.

He gave her a lazy shrug. “Depends.”

“And on what, exactly?”

Oh, this was too easy. “Whether or not it is time to already break up camp and armor up, in spite of our esteemed travel companions clearly not being even remotely ready for either.” Alistair sighed, purely for show. “The plight of being an early riser, I know.”

She scoffed. “Well, in case you are waiting for enlightenment reaching you from above in the meantime, you will be here forever.”

“Aww, still the old ‘Alistair is dumb’ angle?” He clicked his tongue and shook his head at her. “Doesn’t it get old, Morrigan?”

“The truth never does.” She briskly whirled away from him, toward the campfire. A moment passed before her grating voice reached his ears again. “I have several herbs and roots for cooking here.”

“That is… nice. Making yourself useful like that.”

“Unlike you, yes.” Right, he ran into that one. She turned “Just how do you think I should do this, when the person tasked with watching our campfire is as useless as you?”

“This is a rhetorical question, right?” Alistair knew it wasn’t, but it was always fun to show Morrigan the exact level of stupidity she expected of him. And to rile her, in that order.

“Depends.”

She was turning this on the head, using his own words against him. Oh, please Maker, no. Ugh, no other choice then to ask, was there? “On what?”

“Whether or not you want to live long enough to reach Orzammar’s entrance by nightfall with us.”

Of course. “Threats against my life?” He chuckled, lightly. “So boorish, Morrigan.”

“Perhaps, but to cook these, I need kindling.” Crossing her arms, the witch glared down at him. “So it is either wood or your bones. Take your pick, fool.”

Unfortunately, she was right. He had been a tad avoidant of tending to the cooking fire, due to its stinky content bubbling in one large pot. No one could blame him for wanting to be away from that, right? “You have taken a page out of your mother’s cookbook here, I see.” Standing up, he dusted his hands off, getting rid of mud and dampness sticking to them. “Alright, I am going. Don’t blame me if I don’t find any firewood in the mountains, though.”

“Tis easier if you try searching for wood in the general direction of this area’s trees. Do let me know if I should explain to you why.”

“Nah, I’m good, but thanks. I’m truly touched by your benevolence.” With that, he left her standing, passing the suspiciously empty tent of his fellow Warden on his way out. Huh, when did
she leave and where to? Lenya wasn’t exactly an early riser otherwise and rather needed to be
forced to get up in the morning. Alistair stopped for a moment, mulling the questions over before
shaking his head and stowing it away for later. As long she reappeared, as she always tended to do,
it wasn’t his business what she did with her spare time.

Of course, it wasn’t this easy, in the end. Upon following the sloped path downwards to the line of
trees, Alistair saw his fellow Warden hanging sideways from a sturdy, thick tree branch of an oak.
Her back was turned to him and she was dangling ten feet above ground, near twice her height. Oh
Maker, what if she’d fall? Alistair broke into a sprint, his original intent and purpose of coming
down here forgotten. But then she pulled herself up with ease until her head was above the level of
the branch, then went back to let herself hang for a moment. Right after, she repeated the motion,
her legs held completely still as she pulled herself up again.

Oh. He stopped abruptly, coming to a halt just short behind her. Lenya was exercising on her own
instead of being… in danger of breaking her bones. Well, this was a relief, at least. She was also
not wearing any shirt. Save for her breastband and dark, intricate lines of a tattoo snaking down her
bare, muscular back.

Oh. Alistair blinked. Once, twice. Heat rose quickly into his cheeks, while his brain still struggled
to process what exactly he had been stumbling into here. Except maybe the concept of backing
away as fast as humanly possibly, before she would notice his presence. Andraste's arse, why
wasn’t he moving then? Instead his eyes followed the continuous motion of her pull-ups, which
did... interesting things to her back and arms. Had she always been so lean-muscled? Was this
normal for Dalish? The elves he had seen had all been much thinner, nearly scrawny in
comparison. And why was he even still watching? He really, really should look away now, as long
he still had the chance to somehow salvage this situation. The heat lingering in his cheeks trailed
further downwards to settle in his stomach. It was suddenly much, much warmer.

Averting his eyes at last, Alistair cleared his throat. It was as much to announce his presence as it
was to cover up his own awkwardness. In his peripheral vision he noticed how she let go of the
branch and landing gracefully on the ground with a crouch.

"Alistair?" She walked up to him, sweaty and still near half-naked. That fact confused his fight-or-
flight reflex to the point of being rooted on the spot. "What are you doing here?"

"Y-you are not dressed," he blurted out, shielding his eyes with one hand.

Lenya let out a groan. "I am not naked either."

"P-please get dressed."

"Fine," she replied in the same annoyed tone and stepped away from him. Presumably to fetch her
discarded tunic from the ground. Alistair wasn't looking to check that, though. "You shems and
your weird concept of modesty. How you do ever exercise with wearing that many layer of
clothes?"

It is not weird. The mental image of elves frolicking naked through the woods appeared before his
eyes and he shook himself to get rid of it. Bad brain, baadad. "Are you not cold?" he asked instead,
more to distract himself than real interest.

"No. Not anymore." Alistair heard the rustle of fabric as she put her shirt back on. "Helps me to get
rid of pent up energy too." Lenya huffed softly. "I have been so restless ever I drank your shitty
non-cure. Is this normal?"
“In the beginning it is, yes.”

“Ugh, great.”

He let his hand fall back to his side and opened his eyes again. Sweaty strands of her hair, now tucked up into a messy bun, were plastered to her tattooed forehead. She was breathing rapidly and her otherwise fair skin was flushed, heated from the exercise. He blinked slowly, watching her expression shifting into a scowl due to his continued staring.

“I came here to collect firewood,” Alistair said then, too fast and out of place, and glanced away. “I hadn’t expected for you to be here. Sorry about that.”

“No harm done, Alistair.” Her still unexpected usage of his name never failed to send a shiver down his spine, now contrasting the warmth inside. It was a hard-won victory to have bypassed the shemlen stage, to be seen as someone, well, maybe not worthy, but tolerable in her eyes. This was something, a start to build upon. Yes, he was interested in her, wanted to know more of her. Possibly without being stabbed to death by her for expressing said interest. However, it was far from being in the way Leliana implied earlier. Lenya was his fellow Warden, after all. The only person left of the Order he once and readily called home. No one could fault him for trying to hold on to their last remainder, her company. Beyond that, everything else was absurd; a figment of Leliana's mind.

Turning away from him, Lenya whistled sharply. The sparse underbrush nearby first rustled, then made way for the large mabari bounding from it. Within his mouth Revas carried the remains of a hare, his replying boof muffled through the carcass. It seemed even the dog refused to eat the stinking wolf stew in hunting his own spoil. Great. “There you are. Good boy,” she said and ruffled his head. “Didn’t you came here to collect something?”

“Yes, firewood.” Surprised by being addressed again, Alistair nearly stumbled over his words. “I’ll find it by the trees, right?”

Lenya sighed out loud. “Did you bring a knife to cut down twigs?”

Damn it. “… Noo?”

She shook her head with another sigh and pressed the handle of a small blade into his palm. Wait, where had she produced that from? His eyes roamed her figure up and down. She didn’t wear a belt, nor had her simple linen outfit any pockets. “How you have survived all your life without the aid of a group is beyond me. You are like a whelp, puppy.”

Alistair winced a bit. “T-thanks?”

“This wasn’t a compliment.” Lenya rolled her eyes at him. “Humans,” she grumbled and left him standing toward their encampment, with Revas in tow.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading my new chapter/my story in general. In case you were wondering about Lenya's physique after reading this chapter, this professional free/parkour-runner comes the closest to her build. Screw that tiny/scrawny elf image fandom is so enamored with, tbh. Because Dalish elves are build for hunt (speed,
precision and flexibility with a very good upper and mid body strength for climbing) Also dense musculature is a thing ;)

Change Notes: I kept the element of the thunderstorm, which also happened in my old version as they ascend the Frostback Mountain to reach Orzammar. Others than that the old chapter was completely scrapped and replaced with a lot more character moments, with the emphasis being between Lenya/Morrigan, Alistair/Lenya and to a lesser degree: Alistair/Leliana.

What do you think of the chapter? What did you like, what not? Lemme know in the comments ;) Kudos are also appreciated, of course. Feedback is love, feedback is life, heh.
Different Similarities

Chapter Summary

Still on their trek to Orzammar, Lenya discovers similarities with Alistair and Shale, as well an loud shemlen asshole at the gates.

Chapter Notes

Whoops, I forgot to update this never-ending thing for several weeks, sorry. So it is about time, right? Hope anyone still remembers where we are at and cares to read? No beta, we die like hardened authors, heh. Enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning continued without any incidents, except maybe for the unusual breakfast the shemlen in her group had some… justifiable reservations about. Undoubtedly, some elders of her clan would give her an earful for cooking and eating wolf meat. Whereas others would have praised her bravery to defy Fen'harel in this way. Superstition had no place anyway, not when their bellies were as empty as their food reserves. Besides, her clan had survived more than one harsh winter on the unlikely food source. She didn’t relish using wolf meat, cultural implications aside, but it was far better than to go hungry for the rest of the day and journey to the mountain’s peak. It was also actually quite palatable, if one knew how to prepare it properly, and the emptied pot beside the campfire was proof of it.

“When will we be leaving?” Sitting on a ledge towering over their camp, it was impossible to ignore Shale approaching her. Not with the way its massive form threw a long shadow, effectively blocking out the sun she was basking in.

“Why?” Lenya asked, looking straight into the golem’s weird imitation of eyes. Her elevated position let her be face to face with the large creature for once. “Do you have places to be?”

“Noooo,” Shale drawled, its tone all snide and sarcasm. “But The Painted Warden Elf has to, in case It has forgotten Its purpose.” It let out a heavy sigh. “Even if the task in front of It is utterly hopeless in nature.”

The sharp edges of rocks underneath bit into her legs as she leaned forward. “Oh?”

“Yes, indeed. The most likely outcome is that it and its companions will become a stain on some rock for the darkspawn to tread upon.”

Shale wasn’t wrong, quite the opposite. It was just weird to hear it out loud from someone else after spending many moments with the same thought in her head. This… all was insane, impossible. Traveling back and forth through Ferelden to gather troops to fight an immortal god and its overwhelming darkspawn army? She might as well directly lie down and wait for her impending death. This would take far less effort for the same result. However, being passive and giving up before even trying… this wasn’t her. As inane as it all was, Lenya owned the attempt of
succeeding in this task to… him. To her clan. To all the people she had to leave behind.

Lenya screwed her eyes shut as the blue crystal fragments within the golem’s shoulders reflected the sunlight and momentarily blinded her. Blinking to clear her vision and shielding her eyes, she looked back at Shale. It simply shifted its heavy feet and continued to stare her down. Funny how they had these thoughts of futility regarding their task in common. And not only that did they share, no. The cynicism and spite fueling Lenya, urging her to continue brimmed beneath both of their skin; flesh and stone alike. “You are not what I imagined a golem to be, to be honest.”

Shale let out a brief laughter, though it was more akin to a scoff. “And what exactly did the Warden Elf thought a golem would be like?”

“I don’t know?” She shrugged. “Less… sarcastic, maybe?”

“Hah.” The creature’s rough, gravelly voice rang through the camp at its amused outcry. “Perhaps it expected me to have a booming voice? Should I talk in a more monotone way, then?” Shale paused and adapted a dull, flat tone. “Yes, master. I exist to serve the master. I will kill for the master and only for the master!” The golem laughed, though it was short-lived. “Has It even seen or met other golems before? As I am understanding it, I am the first of Its kind it sees, no?”

She flinched a bit, feeling caught. “Yes, but you said you gained your free will, so golems usually have to be different from how you are.”

“Different? Different than what? Different than a statue? Different than a log? Is your species glaring, grumbling and hiding behind hostility all the time, or is it just the Painted Warden Elf who does that?” The golem let out a scoff, its two eye slits narrowing. Like the thick, angular lines etched into its forehead they were always glowing white. “My former master, the mage, used to brag that the dwarves stopped making golems centuries ago. So I do not know what other golems might be like or if there still even are others, but I am already superior by virtue of my free will.” It nodded, pleased by the conclusion. “This is a good thing.”

Lenya frowned, despite agreeing with the creature. “Yes, having a choice is always preferable to being shoved into a role and task outside of your control. As it was for me.”

“It is here, is It not?” Its stone creaked as Shale tilted its head, looking at Lenya. “It has not left yet, which means It has made the choice to stay.” Creators, not this again. Even the golem now was repeating the same halla shit others have prattled on about before.

“Not you, too.” Ugh, so sick of hearing it. “If I had a real choice, I would have ran off to my clan, but -” She stopped, her eyebrows furrowing further. “What were her reasons for sticking around, exactly? Flemeth's words of doom, thus her need to protect her clan? Her own survival? Maybe, but there was something else, wasn’t there? Lenya shook her head. Nope. Not following this trail of thoughts now down its rabbit hole. “The point is… I fear this all is simply too much to take on. I mean… battling an army led by an immortal god? This is insane.”

“As it should!” the golem agreed. “The chances It stopping a Blight are remarkable slim. It would be better to throw oneself off a cliff, I suspect.”

“Thank you, Shale,” Lenya said, snorting. “Your trust in me is appreciated.”

“Hmm, perhaps It should become a golem, like me. This would raise Its chances, at least.” Shale was nearly giddy at the prospect. “Imagine the benefits! No need to eat or sleep or perform…” It shuddered. “… other functions. Walk underwater, Crush the heads of every opponent! The possibilities are limitless! Barring the occasional thirty years of soul paralysis, there's little to
Yeah. Being a golem… would be handy.” As soon Lenya had spoken these words, she regretted them. Because that would mean to forget her emotions and all of her past life and experiences, right? In a way it would be liberating not having to worry about feelings and death any longer, though it was a bit of a double-edged sword. Who would want to live forever, with the people around you dying left and right of age? She had outlived… him already and for what? A cup of darkspawn blood and a shitty, impossible quest. No. It seemed a cruel and lonely life, when you were the only one being immortal and last of your kind.

“I knew it was more sensible than the Warden Clown.” Oblivious to her second thoughts, Shale was quite pleased with the reply given. “For a fleshy thing, anyway.”

“Aww, I’m honored you think so,” she said, only half in sarcasm. However odd the creature was with its cynicism and hatred for birds, its disparity was a good thing. It set it apart from possible other golems existing. “I’m glad you are here, Shale,” she said and meant it.

“Oh, no doubt It is.” It chuckled, its words a bit softer than before, as the golem turned to leave. “Without me, It would have to carry its inventory on its own.”

After Shale’s departure, Lenya lay back down, her back flat against rough stone, while her legs dangled from the ledge’s edge. It wasn’t the most comfortable position or place for a nap, but the warmth of the sun made up for it. Sleep started to tug at her consciousness and the din of encampment to fade away, when the buzz of taint inside her head and the clearing of a throat disturbed her peace. Sighing, she got back up, seeing the human standing below. Unlike an hour or so before, he was now completely clad in his Warden plate armor. Huh. Was it already time to move on? Lenya squinted against the now high-standing sun, toward the others. Sten was taking care of his weapon and armor parts, while the chantry shem folded her clothes to stow them in her pack. The tents were all still standing, though.

“I think I should start wearing a cowbell, maybe. Something to announce my presence to you.”

She leaned forward to look down at him. For once, she was towering over him. “You are already loud enough on your own, puppy.”

“Right,” Alistair shifted on his feet, proving her point with all the armor clanging as he moved. “The screaming in your head thingie. Sorry about that. And the other thing, down the path, once more.”

Why was he so fazed about it? He had a good reason to be at the clearing and no idea she would be there, too. Creators, were all humans so disturbed by a little skin? It was only natural to get rid of excess clothes hindering your movement while exercising, after all. His reaction was stupid. “Noted, but not needed.”

“Ah, good. Don’t want it to be weird between us. Well, weirder, anyway.” And here he was, digging a hole with his tongue again. She thought only Revas possessed such a talent, if in a far more literal way, but no. He excelled in making a fool out of himself, while actually being none. “Oh...” He inhaled sharply, probably realizing how it all sounded, at last. “I didn’t mean –”
“Alistair...” Lenya cut him off, warning. She pushed herself to the ledge’s edge and jumped down, landing elegantly on the ground below. Now where the difference in size between them had been shifted in his favor again, she was the one peering up to him. “What is it you want? Except to annoy me, that is.”

“Um. Right. I was thinking –“ There he stopped again. The remaining words caught in his throat as he suddenly stared at her with intent and intensity. Her eyes flicked left and right, searching for an escape route or stone to hit him over the head with, should he continue being his weird, usual self. Lips curling to a slight grin, his gauntleted hand reached out for her cheek and only froze a hair’s breadth before touching her skin. He let his arm fall sideways again and he awoke out of his odd stupor. “Your cheeks… they are red.”

“What?” Lenya reached up to touch her cheeks and flinched. Elger’nan was and remained an asshole who hated her, apparently. Or else her skin wouldn’t have already shown signs of a light sunburn after not even an hour lying in the sun. Ugh. “Great, I just have to merely look at the sun and this happens, every time.”

“Maybe try glaring, next time?” His grin widened. “Maker knows you could glare the archdemon into leaving, with its tail between its legs, even.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I doubt this helps to alleviate my skin’s fondness for instant sunburn, nor help to end this Blight. Besides, human, it is easy for you to joke, with your naturally brown skin and all, you don’t have this problem.”

He gasped in mock-offense, which ended in a chuckle. He pointed at his face. “Aww, how do you know this isn’t just a tan? I could be secretly sunbathing for hours each day.”

“In Ferelden?” Lenya snorted, caught up in the ridiculousness of it all. “Sure. Good luck with that, puppy.” The rarity of the sun’s appearance had been what lured her into its warm trap, after all. Normally... Ferelden was Ferelden, which usually meant rain or snow, depending on whether it was cold or too fucking cold. There was no between or above this level, except for maybe the odd week or two in summer.

“Ah, damn. I got caught. My secret is out. I only occasionally sunbathe in the two times a year where the weather allows it,” he said, still playing along, and took her annoyance shown at that for an invitation to address her again. “Don’t fret, dear lady. We are far above ground here in the mountains and hence closer to the sun. Therefore its warmth is more intense and sunburns happen more quickly.”

“Just not to you, huh?”

“Nope.” He shrugged, his posture now easy and relaxed like his words. Huh. What a difference it was to his demeanor just minutes ago. “Thanks to my mother, I guess.”

“Your… mother?”

“Yeeees.” Now Alistair was the one rolling his eyes at her, albeit in good humor. “To quote your, ugh, new best friend: Do you think I spawned from a log?” He grinned afterwards, smug like a boy who successfully played a prank on someone and now watched the chaos unfold from some distance. How he resembled a new-born halla calf in these moments. Was this why she felt the bizarre urge to pat him on the head, then? She curled her fingers to fists, resisting the displaced urge. He wasn’t Revas, after all.

“I’m simply… surprised,” Lenya admitted with a shrug. He had never talked about his
background, or family before. Not that she cared anyway. Still… “Where is she, your mother?”

“Dead,” he said, tone dry as sand. The wind picked up and pushed the clouds in front of the sun. It gave his words a dramatic touch. “I have never met her, in fact.”

“What?” Her face scrunched up in a deep frown as she stared up at him. Wow, talk about unexpected similarities here. Creepy. And aside of this, there was another, odd detail. This, she voiced. “How do you know it is your mother then, with the darker skin, if you have never met her?”

Alistair’s shoulders tensed, like his jaw did. His eyes narrowed at a point past her, suddenly distant. “Because my father looks... different.” The irritation gleamed within his gaze as he glanced back at her, supported by a sigh and words much harsher in sound. “I just know, okay?”

Lenya’s eyebrows shot up. She gaped at him for another moment before settling for a scowl. “Alright, no need to yell when I stand right here, human. Ugh.” The conversation was pointless, anyway. She should rather focus on packing her stuff, so they could move on soon. She was about to push past her fellow Warden when he spoke up again, stopping her in her tracks. “Sorry.” His hand reached to touch his face until he remembered his gauntlets and let it rest on his upper arm instead. He drew out his sigh and grimaced. “You are right, I shouldn't have snapped at you. It is simply –”

“...complicated, huh?” Alistair nodded briefly and she relaxed her stance again. “I get that. I never knew my father, but his shadow still loomed large. Very annoying.” Why was she even telling him that? The misplaced and unfair expectation placed upon her by her clan as the Keeper's daughter were none of his business. Ugh.

“Exactly.” The human released a breath and his shoulders sagged, as if all tension dissipated with the exhale. His head tilted a little and his eyes; a warm brown like his skin with just a hint of green in it in this light, lingered a bit longer on herself than needed. Lenya shifted on her feet, frowning a bit even as a smile played across his lips. “Thank you.” His words did help little to diffuse her confusion about his reaction.

“For what?”

“Talking with me, like that.” His smile widened, grew to something bright and genuine. “You never did this before, so I’m glad.”

She blinked. “I talked with you many times before. Or at least a couple.” What was he getting at?

“Yes, but never like this, without scowling and glaring and –”

“Wardens?” The chantry shem appeared behind them, interrupting his sentence. Stepping in between, her blue eyes darting first to Alistair than over to her. Ugh. “Oh. Should I come back later?” How about ‘not at all?’ Turning sideways, Lenya glowered at the intruder, while Alistair coughed into his hand.

“Nah, Leliana, it is alright,” he said, smiling at her. “What do you need?”

“I looked at the map again,” she said, glancing upwards toward the sun still covered by clouds. “If we still want to reach the mountain’s peak by nightfall, we need to break up camp now.”

“Right, makes sense...” He turned toward her. “What do you think, Lenya?”
She rolled her eyes at him. “I think you should think for yourself, human.”

“Aww.” Alistair shrugged, grinning. “I simply value your opinion, dearest fellow Warden. This is not a bad thing, right?”

“Depends,” she huffed, eyeing the chantry shem still standing there. “Whether you mean my opinion or holding your hand through every little thing along the way.”

“W-what?” He flushed so hard that the red within his cheeks momentarily covered the other color of his skin there. His eyes flitted to the other shem. “N-no hand holding here, nope.”

Lenya glanced back and forth between both humans, frowning. Why was he being so weird since that shem arrived? Alistair was weird, yes, annoying even, but acting this flustered with her arrival? She stared a moment longer, observing them both. Wait, could it be? They have been talking a lot lately and shemlen flock together like sheep, after all. Lenya made a face and he arched a questioning eyebrow at her for that. If only she hadn’t bothered to question why Alistair acted all awkwardly with the shem around. He liked her, huh? Ugh. Figures. Her gaze fell back on the red-headed human. “Yeah, lets break up camp then.” With that, she whirled around and left them both standing where they were, no longer caring.

“Squuush!” Shale cackled, as it turned the head of the last assassin alive to a bloody pulp. Alistair grimaced at the nonchalance and glee shown by the creature. Possibly due to all the blood and brain matter splattered about, as well. No matter how common their battles had become by now, it was still disgusting; especially the smell was. She had to suppress gagging as the heavy metallic tang of blood mixing with… other body fluids upon death assaulted her senses. In this regard, Lenya preferred darkspawn and other non-human opponents because while somewhat equally messy, at least they didn’t shit themselves, once killed.

“Ugh, can we leave?” Morrigan turned away, and vocalized what Lenya thought. “Tis disgusting.”

Alistair covered his nose with his bloodied gauntlet, ineffective as it was. “Well, at least we know now that they had a hearty meal before trying to ambush us.

Unbothered by it all, smell and blood, Sten proceeded to rifle through the belongings of the late assassin… bits. Good to see that at least one of them was always thinking practical. The Qunari turned toward her, putting a small leather pouch into her hands. “Coins. There is nothing more of value.”

“Looting them, in the state they are in?” Alistair gave him a look. “Seriously?”

Sten scoffed. “I was searching for clues of their leader, human.”

“I would say they were headhunter, spurred on to attack us for the money Loghain put on the heads of the two remaining Wardens.”

“You are excelling in stating the obvious, bard,” the qunari said, in his ever-dry tone and pushed past the chantry shem. Morrigan followed suit, eager to leave and return to their track up the mountain path.

With the night thick around them, they finally reached the mountain’s peak. High up as they were now it almost seemed to her as if she could touch the stars twinkling in the dark sky. Like freckles covering her own face, the silvery-blue dots spread across the now cloudless firmament. The sparse light they provided was suffice for her to see her surroundings, but obviously not for the
humans in their group. Or one human, more like. The chantry shem cursed in a foreign tongue as she stumbled over the uneven ground in the darkness, whereas Alistair remained blissfully silent at her side. Morrigan sought out her usual distance from them and marched ahead, with her own small wisp of light swirling over her head.

The narrow path widened into a plateau of sorts, with tents and bedrolls spread out around the area of Orzammar's entrance and equally as many dwarves occupying them. They had carts similar to the one Bodahn's; merchants then? The durgen'len had promised to meet up with them here, but Lenya couldn't see him nor his odd son among the other of his kind. Maybe the difficult trek up here was either impossible or had slowed them down to a crawl with the cart.

“Wow.” Alistair whistled, looking up. “Now these are some impressing gates.”

Indeed they were. Thirty feet high wrought-iron gates were carved within the stone of the mountain, framed by enormous dwarven stone figures at each side. Underneath the angular stone carvings, with two torches burning brightly into their sconces stood two durgen’len guards, and even at this hour they were not alone.

“I demand an audience with a representative of your king!” Sten next to her groaned audibly, expressing accurately how she felt. Ah yes, the entitlement of shemlen knew no bounds, as usual. The shem, clad in chainmail armor and a broadsword strapped to his back, blustered and blundered like the self-important idiot he was. “King Loghain demands the allegiance of the deshyr or lords or whatever you call them in your Assembly! I am his appointed messenger!”

“What?” Alistair’s voice had gone shrill and even before losing another word, he stormed forward. Wow, what a bad choice of words. Or was this traitor asshole really now ruler of these shemlen lands? Normally Lenya wouldn’t give two fucks about the affairs of humans, yet after Ostagar her feet followed suit into Alistair’s steps. He, as impossibly tall and as long as his legs were, was of course quicker, arriving at the throng of people before anyone else. “What did you say?” he demanded anew of the shem, but he paid her fellow Warden no heed.

The guard, having long ran out of patience, apparently, only sighed into Alistair’s direction. “Not you too...” Stopping a moment, the durgen’len took a double take, noticing the griffon emblazoned on his chest “...Warden.”

“This might be a good time to get the Warden treaties out and ready,” the chantry shem whispered as she passed her by.

Lenya eyed how the rest of the shem’s group, a Qunari and a human mage, not older than herself, begun to circle around Alistair at that. Her blades were back into her hands in a blink of an eye. “And our weapons, it seems.”

“Ooohh, more heads to crush?”

“Not out the question, Shale,” she replied, hurrying up the few steps, which parted the entrance from the plateau down below.

“Pashaara, a Tal-Vashot!” Sten growled, and spit on the ground. Well, it seems as if the Qunari had found his own least favorable person within this group. This started to become a promising end to an exhausting, literal shit-filled day. Great.

“Andaran atish’an,” Lenya beamed at the guard, adapting a fake sweetness to her voice. “Sorry to bother you, dear ser durgen’len. But may we pass so we don’t have to spent any moment longer in the presence of these self-important assholes? Warden business and all that.”
“Oh, another one?” The guard’s attention shifted to her and the griffon on her chest. I gladly would, Warden. Your order is highly regarded among my people after all.” Huh, they are? Curious. “But alas, our king has returned to the stone not three weeks ago, due to his grief about losing both of his children. So as much I want to, Warden, Orzammar will have none but its own until our throne is settled.” Fantastic. Lenya suppressed a groan. Was there something in the water which led to foreign ruler drop dead when you needed them most? Talk about ill-timing.

"The Wardens killed King Cailan and nearly doomed Ferelden!” the asshole sputtered, pointing at them with an indignation of a da’len. His lower lip even trembled like a three years old having a temper tantrum. Amusing. "They're sworn enemies of King Loghain!"

“Oh, shut the fuck up.” His voice sounded like the whiny knight back in Ostagar, which wasn’t the most fortunate person to be connected with for the shemlen. Everything about him was as grating like the late Warden recruit, but tenfold as much.

“W-what?” The color in his face adapted an angry red-purple, almost as if being squished by Shale. All that was missed was by now him stomping the ground. “How dare you, an insignificant knife-ear, to speak with me –“ He didn’t come any further in his arrogant prattling, probably due to her blade’s tip finding a way between the cracks of his armor and into his abdomen. The ring of a weapon being drawn sounded through the silence of the night, coming from the shem’s Qunari companion. They were outmatched and if the nervous glances of boy-mage to their leader were any indication, they knew that.

“Look around, shem’alas ,” she hissed, taking a small deliberate step closer and spearing her blade a bit deeper into him, drawing blood. The inflicted wound wasn’t life-threatened… yet . Alistair standing right behind his back didn’t exactly made things better for this asshole, but this was part of her point to make. “How do you like your chances here, hmm?” Lenya pointedly nodded toward Sten and Shale, then observed how his eyes trailed over to a snarling mabari and the bard with her bow, ready to fire several arrows held in her bow hand. Morrigan stood in some distance with the opposing group, a fireball dancing in her palm as not-so-silent threat.“Now look back to me, shemlen.”

He did as told, though scowled at her. In the corner of her eyes, there was movement of a large figure, Sten or Shale, to the opponent warrior ready to attack. Alistair had turned a bit as well, his position exactly in between the shem and enemy tal-va… something . She had to ask the Qunari what he meant with it, once it was over. Lenya threw her fellow Warden a glance and he gave her a hint of a nod, indiscernible to everyone else. The past weeks of battle had been good for that, developing a silent way of communication and understanding. It worked much better than his endless squall of words, anyhow.

"Why are you an idle bystander in this crime, dwarf?” The shem screamed, a hint of panic in his voice. “In the name of King Loghain, I demand you execute this… stain on the honor of Ferelden!”

The guard simply rolled his eyes at the shemlen asshole, which made him all the more likable to Lenya. "Kill each other as you wish, but take your sodding fight off my doorstep!"

Alas, she couldn’t heed his wish, as everything happened too quickly then. The asshole moved backwards to escape her blade wounding him and in effect, directly into Alistair’s arms. Turning the shemlen sideways in a swift motion, he gutted him from behind.

“By the stone, Wardens! What did I tell you just now?”

Lenya threw Alistair a pointed look to emphasize the guard’s words and side-stepped to make room for the asshole’s dying body toppling to the ground. Figures. Her fellow Warden was normally
mild-mannered, but as soon someone used the bad L-word in his presence, he shifted into someone without patience or mercy. While understandable, the stark contract was also jarring.

The not-Qunari tried to attack, at least, which was more than the asshole shemlen ever achieved. Alas, there were arrows fired into his direction hindering him in the notion. That, and an angry actual-Qunari charging at him. Lenya wasn’t squeamish, but the way his bones cracked and his innards got splayed across said doorstep the guard wanted to keep clean wasn’t a pretty sight. She winced a little.

“Please don’t kill me, please don’t kill me!” The voice belonged to the boy mage, cowering on the ground, next to his slain comrade. He was shaking like leaves, hands protectively covering his face and head.

“You!” Alistair stormed forward until he towered over the mage. Warm blood still dripped from his sword and arm, raised as it was. “You were with them.”

Lenya stepped into his way. How weird it was, to find herself in a position like that, defending an enemy shemlen. But the shivers running down her spine didn’t originate from the cold mountain air, that was for sure. Alistair’s bloodlust was uncanny, unnerving her. She glared up to him. “Stop it, puppy.”

Meanwhile the mage was full-on sobbing now. “Please don’t kill meeee!”

“Alistair!” The chantry shem called out for him, and his stance relaxed when she arrived at his side. Great.

“Let’s crush Its head and be done with it,” Shale groused, glowering down on the shemlen as though he were an insect to exterminate.

“Noooo! Please. I won’t tell anyone,” the boy shemlen cried. “I’m just a simple mage who tries to survive.”

“Far away from home then, huh?” Alistair quipped and lowered his sword. “Last time I checked, the mage tower is in the other direction.”

Lenya frowned. *Mage Tower?* Alistair had mentioned before in relation to the Warden treaties, yes. It had been all vague and information scarce, so she had no idea how exactly this looked like. Shemlen mages weren’t free and frowned upon, unlike with her people, yet were they all thrown in one tower, never to leave? This seemed insane.

“More coins,” Sten grumbled and cut her thoughts off with putting them into her palm. The mage-boy ran past her, terrified. The conflict had been resolved while she had been wondering over mage piling up and other weird human shit and customs, like so often lately.

“What is with the coins, Sten?”

“You are the leader here, are you not?” He scoffed. “Spoils of battle are to be shared with you, then.”

“Oh?” Whatever happened to his women do not fight shtick? “So you indeed accept me as such?”

He shrugged. “For the moment.”

Well, this sounded ominous. Nothing she would spare any further thought about though, at least not right now. With these assholes out of the way, the question still was how they would get inside.
Ah, the treaties.

“There they are,” Alistair gasped, and with the aged documents in his cleaner hand walked over two the two dwarven guards.

The man sighed at them. “Wardens, as thankful as I am to have this human no longer screaming into my ears like a deranged bronto… who is going to clean up your mess now?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Alistair quipped and handed the guard the paper. Lenya glanced up to her fellow Warden. Nothing was left of the prior rage distorting his expression and, even more oddly, the torchlight overhead got reflected within his brown eyes. To see a slight shimmer reflected there was normal, even for humans, yes, but –

"Well," the dwarf looked back up at them, interrupting her thoughts. "That is indeed the royal seal, and only the assembly has the authority to address it." He handed the documents back to Alistair. "Therefore you Grey Wardens and your entourage may pass." He hesitated as his eyes shifted over to Shale. “Just keep a close watch on the golem – "

Shale glared down at him. "Hmpf. I can watch myself..."

“– so it doesn't break too much," the dwarf finished his sentence, gulping. He turned to yell something in a foreign tongue and the giant gates behind him started to move. "You came to seek help, Warden. Though I'm not sure if you'll find it here."

"Great," Lenya uttered under her breath, rolling her eyes. Just let this day be over already. “That is reassuring.”

Morrigan frowned at the opening gates, her posture tense. “I understand we are going underground?” It was more a rhetorical question than anything else, the quiver in her voice obvious. Warm air wafted into their face from the depth beyond them, contrasting with the biting cold wind lashing at them from behind. “Having so much rock over one's head is… disquieting."

Lenya squeezed her eyes with two fingers, trying to fend off the tiredness and agreement to the witch’s words. She failed both and the glowering red of Orzammar beyond the gates seemed never more a trap than now. Taking a deep breath of fresh mountain air before trading it for stale one, Lenya entered the dwarven city.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes: Except for a couple of sentences from my old version, this chapter is completely newly written.

Thank you for reading. Do leave a comment and tell me what you liked/what not, please <3
Welcome To Orzammar

Chapter Summary

Going underground with all the rock overhead in search for someone capable for fulfilling the dwarven treaty, Lenya is having a very bad time.

Chapter Notes

Start of the long, long Orzammar/Deep Roads arc with lots of character moments and relationships development in between. The other treaty plotlines are (hopefully) shorter afterwards. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For several minutes now, Lenya was eyeing the tankard of dwarven ale, the round-faced female durgen’len had settled down on the carved stone table before her. Without ordering it, even. It reeked like dirt and moss in liquid form, ugh. The unwanted smell mingled with the stale sweat and air here, making it hard to breathe. Not only in the tavern they escaped into shortly after their run-in with a bunch of bickering durgen’len nobles, nope. All of Orzammar was suffocating with its lack of any wind, turning the lingering air stuffy and hot through lava vents and literal lava pools on the sides of each winding path. Even the tavern was illuminated in a bright, orange-red shine. Lenya pressed her eyes together, trying to give them much needed respite. They burned like all of her muscles did and pain pierced the sides of her head, heralding a headache. Perfect. Must be a new record then, since they were only here for half an hour with all the massive rock overhead. She blamed it on the all-encompassing, for her unnatural light of the lava below and around the city, and the exhaustion from their long trek. Leaning back on the bench, she breathed out, wishing herself away from the din of the foreign songs and boisterous laughter of the patrons here. Revas whined at her from beneath the large table, playing the small lap dog he wasn’t by far. The mabari licked one of her gloves and the warm wet of his tongue registered only faintly upon her skin through the leather. Nevertheless she appreciated the comforting gesture all the same and gave his head a quick ruffle.

“Long day, huh?” The other, human puppy of their group expressed his concern. His gaze lingered upon herself, so she reopened her eyes. His face was close to hers, bloodied like her own. They still had no place to stay and thus no chance yet to clean or rest up. This tavern didn’t seem to have rooms to rent either. Maybe she should just walk all the way back, sparing out the durgen’len-sized bloodstain on the floor in the middle of the commons, and spent the night under the stars. Alistair grimaced, backing away a bit again, giving her room. “I hope we can find some rest soon, even if we are closer to the Deep Roads here.”

“Deep Roads?”

“Right, you don’t know, sorry.” He sighed, his expression still pained. “I will tell you more later about it and what it means for us Wardens, if you like. But I fear you are bound to find it out
yourself very soon anyway.”

Wow, her companions had a penchant for ominous sentences lately, huh? “What is that suppo –“

“Is this how dwarven politics works?” Morrigan interrupted her. With her arms crossed and an air of disgust expressed at everything around herself, the witch had chosen to remain standing in some distance of their table.

The chantry shem frowned at the large table they occupied, secluded from the other patrons. “I heard stories about their politics’ brutality, but seeing a noble being murdered in the streets due to a disagreement? This… is something else.”

The witch shook her head. “No wonder there are so few of them left anymore.”

“That Bhelen… he is such a sympathetic fellow, isn’t he?” Alistair quipped, sighing dramatically. “Warms the heart, really.”

“We don’t have enough information yet to judge the situation, Alistair,” the chantry shem reminded him. Lenya rolled her eyes. Thanks for stating the obvious!

He snorted, his tone annoyed. “Well, at least the other party present in the commons did not gut a man for disagreeing.”

“Yes, welcome to Orzammar, I suppose,” a bright voice behind him said, having listened in. It belonged to a female durgen’len, her face as pale and round as it was friendly and open. Curly red hair fell well down her back. She was… smaller than herself even and Lenya was already the shortest member of her group. She rubbed the stiff part of her neck. Stupid long-legged shemlen and other giant companions, ugh. But what the durgen’len lacked in height, she matched with broad hips and generous curves, emphasized by her low-cut clothes. “Better get used to it, especially with the madness going on since our king’s death.”

She stopped, giving Alistair an appraising look. “...Name is Corra, Warden. It’s been a long time since one of your kind stumbled last into our humble tavern. And they were all not as good-looking as you are.” Wow that was… subtle. Like Shale smashing its fists into their enemies. Next to her eye-rolling self, Alistair shifted in his seat and coughed into his hand. If she kept this rate up, her eyes would get stuck at the back of her head, just like Ashal – No. She shook herself, but the ache already flared up inside, too late to suppress.

“Yeah,” Lenya drawled instead, and lightly elbowed her fellow Warden to finally stop moving. His discomfort was contagious, settled low into her stomach. Better than the other option anyhow, to think about them and –

“You are an elf,” a high-pitched squeal droned into her ears and Revas ducked under the table with a whine at the sound. “And such a cutie, too.”

Lenya sat up straight and stared at the woman. “Excuse me?” At that, Alistair begun to lower his head too, mimicking the mabari once more. The chantry shem started snickering, while Morrigan went through a whole array of disgusted noises.

“Ah...” Corra stemmed the serving tablet under her arm and raised the other hand to placate. “I mean no offense, Warden. It is just your kind is even rarer to find in Orzammar.” She paused and tapped her full lips with one finger to think. “There is that one guy in employment of a noble house, but other than that, you are the first elf I have seen, in a long time.”

“Fascinating, really.” She settled for an annoyed groan this time. While the durgen’len was friendly
and meant no harm, her spunky way was adding to her budding headache. “Wait... haven’t you put down this stinky beverage in front of me a while ago? And now you act as if you see me for the first time?”

“Well...” She hesitated a moment, a blush crept into her round cheeks. “It was meant for the Ser Warden.”

“Oh in this case, Alistair...” She pushed the tankard toward him. “Feel free to drink.”

“Thanks, too kind, Lenya,” he dryly retorted before addressing the waitress again. “Do you have any rooms to rent? We need a place to stay. We hadn’t even the chance to clean up yet.”

“That... I see.” She gave him another up and down look, more amused than appraising this time. “Dangerous times, eh?” She cleared her throat. “But ’fraid not so, Ser Warden. We usually don’t have Topsiders visiting Orzammar. If it happens it is on behest on some noble deshyr, who is providing quarters for them, then. Or Wardens who are stopping here before leaving for the Deep Roads.” Corra frowned, shifting her feet. “But you are both much too young for that.”

There it was again. The mentioning of that place and more ominous implications. Ugh, enough already. “What is that supposed to mean?”

The durgen’len blinked, her gaze flicking over to her. “You... don’t know? By the stone, you really are young then.” Lenya threw her a glare. Naive, you mean?

“Whatever happened to the Wardens then, for you to be here? Are the rumors true, of Ostagar?”

Alistair grimaced. “This is... a discussion for another time. May we have some information about what is going on in Orzammar?”

“And a drink?” a patron barged into the conversation. “Ya not gonna get paid for talking, Corra!”

She turned around to the elder man. “Shut up, Derrin, or I refuse to put them on your already staggering tab and make you pay up today.”

Her sharp reply mollified the man in an instant. “Fine. I’ll wait. Just not for long.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, Wardens, but I’ve got a job to do.” She glanced about, as if suddenly becoming aware of all the patrons here. The tavern was bustling, for each dwarf leaving, three new people arrived. “You best go either to the Shaperate or the Assembly in the Diamond Quarters for detailed information. There you will also find the late king’s palace, now solely occupied by his son, Bhelen - and his men.” She gasped, snapping her finger. “Oh right, and you Wardens also have an own place there, though I fear due to your Order’s long absence it isn’t all that well maintained.”

“This is good news, nonetheless, thank you. “Alistair breathed out, some of his tension dissipating. “Now, since we are here already, can we order some food and drinks?”

Corra laughed. “Now that is more in the line of my expertise.”

With the sweetness of mead still dancing upon her tongue and a bellyful of hearty food, Lenya and her companions left the tavern a bit later. Outside, it was just as bustling as in the tavern and just as
stuffy. Several merchants and crier beckoned the steady stream of passersby to pay heed to their stall or news. Guards patrolled in groups around each area to keep the peace, their heavy armor creaked with each step taken upon cracked stone.

The heat of the lava pools burned upon her face, even as she turned away, toward a cluster of people that didn’t fit to the Common’s more rustic charm. Clad in silken finery they poured around Shale still standing there.

“A golem? I haven’t seen one, well, ever,” a woman with meticulously pinned up hair gasped. “I thought they were all gone.”

“It came with the Wardens, I heard,” said a plumb *durgen’len* next to her. “I wonder where they have its control rod.”

To avoid an inevitable bloodbath, Lenya hurried over to the crowd of nobles. “Shale doesn’t need to be controlled, it is its own person. And now… shoo!”

“N-no control rod?” The styled woman’s voice squeaked, was grating on her already thin nerves. “Exceptional, Warden. How does it work then?”

“I’m willing to pay a hefty sum to acquire it!” Plump Man nodded with a hum. “It would fit well into my collection.”

“Bah, the Painted Warden Elf gave away my rouse. I was waiting for them to all come even closer to me, and then… “ Shale chuckled as it made an unsubtle movement with its fist. “… *squiiiiiish.*”

To their credit, they at least backed away with a shocked outcry, understood the threat for what it was.

“Stop treating our golem like a thing, ugh.” Lenya motioned the creature to move. “Come on, we are leaving, Shale. No squishing.” Stopping, she looked over her shoulder, back to them and added a threat of her own. “… For now.”

“Spoilsport,” it scoffed, but followed suit. Away from the crowd and reunited with the others, Shale stopped short and towered over her. “Our golem? I was not aware I was owned by It.”

“You aren’t,” Lenya stated and petted Revas rubbing his head against her armored leg. “But you have decided to follow us. So you are part of our group now.”

The golem’s white lava eyes narrowed upon her and, then, nodded. “Hmm, I see. It makes sense, for once.”

Surveying the tireless bustle, the chantry shem sighed. “We should probably find the Warden compound in the Diamond Quarters and rest up before we visit the Assembly or the Shaperate.”

“Oh, once more she states the obvious,” Morrigan snorted, but it lacked the humor. “I wonder if that is what the Chantry teaches these days, as it would also explain Alistair.”

As if on cue, her fellow Warden reappeared among them. “While you were busy bickering, I actually asked for directions to get there.” He made a face, blushing lightly. “The noble woman over there gave it to me, among the weird offer to… clean me up.”

The chantry shem snickered. “My, popular, aren’t you?”

“Ugh. I… just want to – I’m tired. So can we make our camp there, for the night? Whatever that means here, in Orzammar.” Right, whether night or day, with all the stone overhead, time had little
meaning anymore. Not really a comforting thought. Turning, he set out to reach the stairs at the end of the long hallway, not waiting for the others.

The Diamond Quarter wasn’t that much different to the other area. To Lenya, anyway. Same stuffy air and pools of lava at each side, but hey at least the ground here was marbled instead of cracked stone. Wow, how nice. Next to her, Shale looked around, observing the towering buildings and huge estates they walked past. "Is this where the rich midgets live? Such big houses they have. How ironic."

Following Alistair, they passed by the same finely clothed and adorned durgen'len already seen in the crowd in the Commons. Criers gave their endorsement for Bhelen and another name that was foreign to her, but their voices became quickly a background din, as Lenya’s eyes drooped, struggling to keep walking.

"Why does the swamp witch still travel with the Grey Wardens?" Lenya’s eyes flew open. Shale speaking up saved her from the grace of tripping over her own feet. Also, it would have been a tad awkward to stumble into a lava pool doing so. Perhaps. At least she wouldn't have to deal with that durgen'len and Blight halla-shit any longer. No… Lenya shook herself and slowed her steps to be at Morrigan’s side.

The witch didn't even stop or look at the golem. "Swamp witch? 'Tis me, I take it? How nice. You think I shouldn't, hmm?"

It shrugged. "It simply have no reason to stay."

"But you have found reasons for yourself to stay, I take it?" Morrigan sneered. "Without a control rod, you have as few reasons to stay as you think I'd have."

"That is not completely the truth. I have no history or purpose, but the one of the swamp witch is simply unknown.” The golem paused, purely for effect. “I wonder why…”

"Keep wondering, golem, and I'll turn into a bird,” Morrigan said and tensed. “I can do that."

"Oh, go on and do it," Shale laughed. "As a feathery fiend, I could at least crush it then."

She smirked at Shale’s stony back. "I haven't said I would be in reach then. I would simply hover and wait, until—"

Shale let out a loud, dull groan. "No. I shall be silent now."

The golem kept its promise. With their banter over, no one spoke until they had reached their destination. Located in the furthest left part of the diamond district was a house, made of stone like the others, but much smaller in size. It also lacked the intricate carvings and other splendor the larger buildings were decorated with. If not for the two banner with silver griffons upon blue background hanging at each side of the entrance, the building could be mistaken as vacant and never inhabited. Well, in a way it was all that, with all the Ferelden Wardens dead and -

“There we are.” Lenya didn’t miss the quiver in Alistair’s voice, how his eyes fixed the banner to his left. She stepped forward, to his side, her hand reaching up to his shoulder before pulling away again. Not her business.

“Let’s go then, shall we,” she said instead and took the lead again in entering the building ahead of
the others.

The red glow of the lava didn’t reach the sparse interior, nor did its warmth. It was cold, empty and covered in stillness. Poignant with *their* absence.

“Well,” Alistair said, too quickly and bright. “I doubt we can rest while standing about, let’s -” A noise cut him off and his hand flew to the hilt of his weapon. Pushing past them, Sten crossed the hallway in a few strides, steering toward the main hall. Someone shrieked, the voice female and frightened.

Lenya rushed after him and so did the rest of her companions. The intruder dangled from the Qunari’s outstretched arm a feet or more above ground and flailed helplessly. “Sten, stop!”

“You are not a Warden!” he said, low and through gritted teeth, each word a warning.

“I… I -” the durgen'len tried, though was either too terrified or incapable to speak. Given how her skin color shifted from pale to a worrying shade of red, it was more of the latter.

Alistair stepped forward. “Let her go, Sten!”

He scoffed. “And let her get away with what she has stolen?”

Lenya pointed at the durgen'len. Her short, raven hair was tousled and her clothes were plain, but clean. She did not appear to have any weapons on herself. A worker, maybe? “Does she look like a thief to you?”

“No.” His eyes narrowed on her, then on the woman. “But no one looks or acts their part in these lands.” Then, he finally released his hold on her collar, letting her fall to the ground, ass first. He whirled away with an angry snarl. “Do as you please.”

“Ouch!”

“Are you alright?” The chantry shem offered her a hand, which the durgen'len took. The human gripped her hand harder than needed while helping her up and shifted her friendly demeanor to something threatening in an instant. “You better tell us what you were doing here!”

“There is no need for *princess stabbity* to come out to play… or, you know, *stab*, Leliana.” Alistair said, nodding toward the opposite wall. “Just look.”

Indeed, this room was different to the entry hall. Less dusty and empty and… brighter through some odd glowing stones placed in all corners.

Alistair pointed toward the large basket placed on one of the beds there. “A thief would take something, not leave… gifts, don’t you think?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t supposed to be here when you would arrive,” the woman said, rubbing her hurting bottom with a grimace. “It took me longer to clean here than thought and I forgot the time a bit.” Her eyes grew wide. “… Ancestors, my lord is probably waiting for my return.” Then, under her breath, she added quietly yet loud enough for Lenya to hear, “I hope I’m not in trouble. I need this job.”

“Cleaning?” Alistair asked, but Lenya stopped paying attention to the durgen'len’s reply. She walked over to the bed and fished the piece of paper out of a large terracotta crate. It was filled to the brim with foreign looking food and other bauble.
“Welcome in Orzammar, Wardens,” she read. “I hope you enjoy the small presents left for you. When you are ready, find my lieutenant Dulin Forender in my estate and together we can end this stalemate. With the best regards, Lord Harrowmont.”

“You can... read?” All heads turned toward the chantry shem’s surprised exclaim, Morrigan’s with an added groan and a roll of her eyes. Okay, this was it, she was gonna strangle this obnoxious woman.

Crumbling the note within her clenched fist, Lenya threw her a pointed glare. “No, shem. I’m just faking it.”

“Seriously, Leliana?” Shaking his head, Alistair huffed out his disapproval. “Seriously?”

“I...” That asshole bit her lip and glanced downward. Well, at least she had the grace to look ashamed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean -”

“Yeah, you never mean to anything, but you fucking do it anyway. Asshole.” Do not kill her. Do not kill her. Do not – ugh. You know what… fuck this.” Letting the note fall to the ground, Lenya stormed off.

“How very mature,” Sten muttered after her, but he could fuck off. They all should. Couldn’t they leave her alone for one damn minute? It was suffocating and reaching the exit of the Warden quarter offered no respite.

“Is It going somewhere?” Oh right, Shale was still standing here. “Good. Let’s kill something.” How about the shemlen asshole inside? That would require Shale to fit through the small door there, though. “I don’t want to stand about here. I could have done this in Honnleath.”

Lenya leaned herself at the wall of the building, her back flat at its cool stone and exhaled. Her heart still pounded in her ears, her fists clenched together so hard it hurt. There was no being alone here, no escape toward a secluded pair of trees. Creators, there was no tree here to begin with, nor the sky or fresh air. Just stone and heat and endless piles of rocks everywhere. And now she was even talking to one. Figures. “Why were you placed there, in front of the tower?”

“That is where Wilhelm kept me. He wanted me out in the open where I could be frightening, like a scarecrow.” The golem snorted. “I was supposed to watch for thieves.” Pausing, it added with a derisive scoff, “Plus his wife didn’t want me indoors. She said there wasn’t room for me. Hag.”

She could hardly focus on the golem’s words with the anger hazing her vision like fog. Shale’s quite unconventional view on things was also a good distraction from the urge to punch the wall behind herself. Or rather... someone. “His wife?” Lenya asked, to keep the golem talking and her mind occupied.

“Hmph. I was once larger. Ten feet tall,” it replied. “Then the loathsome hag complained that I couldn’t fit through the doors. So the mage had me shrunk down.” Shale gasped, the indignation vibrating off its stone. “Shrunk down! Can it believe it? And she still wanted me out!”

_How does one shrink a – never mind, don’t care._ Tensing even more, Lenya waited for the the urge to escape and run away to pass. Where would she run to, anyway? Into the next pit of lava? Better to throw a certain shemlen in there. “Humans are assholes.”

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“Naturally.” Shale nodded. “One just need to look at them. They’re so...small, squishy... and _dumb._”

“And ask, or assume stupid shit, which brings us back to being dumb.”
“Yes,” the golem agreed, rather pleased. “I had a discussion with The Qunari about humans the other day. It said It has animals similar to them in Its country.”

“I overheard that conversation.” She had to grin a bit at the memory. “These animals, they are really flinging feces at each other?”

“It is a rather apt comparison, is it not?” The creature chuckled. “Once I was a statue, it took those villagers years before they’d even approach me. And the first one to actually work up the never to touch me urinated himself. “ It shuddered. ”So them flinging feces at each other like the animals? Not far-fetched at all.”

The door behind them opened and a disturbed durgen'len left the building. “Ancestors, you surfacer had too much sky,” she cursed, shaking her head. “No wonder you are all mad!”

Shale watched the woman leaving in a haste. “I’m unconvinced of the midgets’ capabilities as well, so far.”

“Yeah,” Lenya breathed. “Orzammar has been not what I imagined it to be, to be honest.”

“What about It?” the golem asked, looking at her. “It is hard to grasp. It does not like humans, nor the midgets and scowls a lot. What does It like?”

Lenya peered upwards to the shadowed vastness before her eyes meet the stone ceiling instead of the sky. My people. Freedom. Both of them were gone, left behind by the taint in her veins. “Does it matter?”

“Not to me, no.” Shale’s stone creaked as it lifted its shoulders to a shrug. “As long the Painted Warden Elf finds enough things to kill for me, that is.”

She relaxed a little. That she could do. “I think this will be the least of our problems.”

“Good to know.” Shale fixed her eyes with a glare, but its voice didn’t have the usual bite. “In the village, the humans have always spoken about elves being inferior.”

Anger rushed her again, sank as heat into her cheeks. “Because they are assholes.”

"Yes," the golem agreed, then scoffed. “It was obviously only their own stupidity talking.”

“Thank —” The buzz of taint tingled in her head, keeping her from completing the sentence.

The door opened and Alistair stopped within its frame, his eyes flitting between the golem and herself. “Did I disturb something here? A session of the ‘I hate humans club’ perhaps? Sorry.” He sounded way too amused to be actually sorry.

No. Lenya shook her head.

“Yes,” Shale said, blunt as ever. “I may forgive It when It comes closer and lets me crush Its head.”

“Yeah, I fear I have to decline this generous offer. But thank you nonetheless, Shale.”

“Hmph,” the golem only made and faced the other way, not longer caring.

“I was hoping that the buzzing in my head was actually you and not a darkspawn straggler in Orzammar’s streets,” he said with a sigh and handed her a small bottle. “Peace offering?”
She eyed the bottle for a moment before taking it. “I have no qualms with you, puppy.”

“Oh?” The smile in his voice was apparent. “I’m glad, don’t get me wrong, but why not? Am I a special human, then?”

“Yes, eee...special...ly annoying.”

“Oh ho ho, how you wound me so with your razor sharp wit.” Taking two steps at once, he sat down on the top of them. Dressed down to his dark-blue gambeson and pants, his broad form still took up all the space next to her. “I’m also glad you didn’t run away.”

“Where to, huh?” She tensed. “There is hardly a place here to run to, except shitty rocks.” She threw a glance over her shoulder. “No offense, Shale. You are cool.”

“Flattery? And obvious flattery, too,” the golem said, its tone sarcastic. “I feel warm and fuzzy inside.”

For a moment it looked as if the human wanted to argue her point, but he only shrugged. “It is rather... stuffy here, isn’t it?”

Lenya huffed at the bottle. The beverage had no label, but a dark-yellow color. “What is this, anyway? It looks like piss.”

“I would hope it is not, err, that.” Alistair coughed into his hand. “Since I fished it out of the crate left by the dwarven lord. Totally not to bribe us into supporting him, I’m sure.”

“Hmm...” She uncorked the bottle and, oh Creators, she knew that smell wafting toward her. How could she ever forget? “Cider.”

“Is that good or bad?” He leaned sideways, more to her, trying to gauge her reaction. “It looked... fruity and you seem to like fruity, sooo was it wrong?”

“No,” Lenya said, with a voice far too small. Of course this stupid human would accidentally stumble over something precious to her. Oh, the memories.

“Good, phew. For a moment I was afraid you would throw the bottle at my head.”

“I can do this, if It wishes so much for it. Or throw my fist at Its head. Both of them, in fact.”

“Um, still no, Shale, but thanks.”

Lenya sniffled and blinked a bit faster. To distract herself she took a sip from the bottle. It was not as good as she had remembered it. Less naturally sweet and with a dry, sour note, different. Of course it was, it wasn’t them who made this cider. And still... it was nice, even as a wistful pang gripped her heart. “One day, late in summer my clan found this spot...” Another sip, turning into a mouthful. Why am I even telling him this? “And there was this row of large, wild apple trees, away from the shemlen orchards, amidst the forest. All bearing fruit.” She had been so young, there. Bare-faced still, though eager to earn her vallaslin soon to follow, to proof her worth. “I remember climbing the trees, picking the most apples out of everyone. Because I am good in that, climbing.” Tamlen... had been second. After me, he had the second mos –

“That, I noticed,” he said, warm and amused, diverting her thoughts. Lenya stole a glance toward her fellow Warden, meeting his gaze, equally as warm. He let his head rest in one of his hand, his arm stemmed on his knee, relaxed, waiting. There was nothing left of the insecure, hesitant man she experienced earlier, upon entering the Warden quarters.
She took another mouthful from the small bottle, nearly emptying it. The cider was more heavy and went quicker into her head, if the rush of heat within her cheeks was anything to go by. It was… a comfortable fuzziness however, mellow. “We cooked half of the apples harvested to ferment them into cider. To sell or trade it with shemlen later, but winter was harsh that year.” Lenya laughed out at her own words. Yeah, like any year here in Ferelden, basically. “So we kept most of it and heated the cider to warm up, after coming back from a hunt.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was.” Lenya agreed, matching his smile. “One night, I snuck to the pot with cider and… and — *drank too much of it, with him.* She stopped there with a shaky exhale, couldn’t continue. Memories morphed all too quickly into melancholy and regret. He would never again – The gentle press of his hand upon her arm halted this thought, let her resurface.

Alistair ducked his head, to catch her own, bowed one. “You are allowed to miss your people and clan, you know? It is okay.”

**What?** She gripped the bottle a lot harder. “I don’t need your permission, human.”

“No, of course not.” He backed away, let his hand fall sideways. “But maybe to hear those words.”

She blinked faster, trying to keep her tears at bay. Damn it! As disarming his earnestness was, it should be classified as a weapon. “Stop being so nosy.”

“Ugh, disgusting!” Shale sniffed, for someone without nose astonishingly loud. “I’m already forced to stand outside. I refuse to watch Its fumbling attempts of a mating ritual.”

Lenya used her fellow Warden’s sputtering to face the other direction and wiped at her eyes. “It better leaves. Now. Before I make It.”

“Point. Taken.” The golem actually barred Alistair from being outside. Curious. “Lenya?”

“We are thrown out. Or in? I don’t know. I have never been thrown out outside. Huh.” She omitted to mention that Shale only meant him, but the golem protested not overly much when he addressed her. Might as well return there then. Ugh.

She put the bottle down where she stood and faced him again. “Is it okay to strangle someone in their sleep?”

“Maker’s breath.” His shock was only half-played. “I understand you being angry with Leliana, believe me. I’m too for this careless and stupid thing she said… but I say stupid things all the time and you haven’t strangled me yet.”

“Not yet, no,” she said, not missing a beat.

He opened the door and waited for her to enter first. “Sometimes you really scare me. And with sometimes, I mean often.”

“While you say stupid shit, yes…” Lenya hesitated, watched him close the door behind them. With the outside light gone, the long hallway was covered in darkness again. Only the sheen of the glowing stones within the large main room permeated the shadows lingering. Her eyes burned as they adjusted and made up for the lack of light, suffice for her to see. Gods, she had forgotten how tired she was. “It is nothing like… that.”
“Thanks.” She heard the smile in his voice more than seeing it. “It was insensitive of her to say the least, but please... no murder?”

Her skin itched underneath all the dried blood. She had to get out of this armor. “Ugh, too much effort anyway.”

“Good.” He stopped his steps, which made her halt as well. Wait, why? “You know...” His voice trembled a bit. “When we first entered the quarters, I wanted nothing more than leaving again.” Ah. Yes, she noticed. “But thanks to you... it isn’t as bad. I’m not alone.”

Her head whirled round to him. “You are not– “ Oh, right. It was a Warden thing, because of course it was, with him. “Yeah...”

Alistair closed the distance between them in two strides and squeezed her shoulder as he passed her by. “Nor are you.”

Shit. This flush of heat did most certainly not come from anger now. How in Thedas – ugh, this human. A good moment after Alistair had left her standing there, with these words, Lenya moved into the direction of a washstand, to clean up and cool off.

After their detour to the shaperate and yet another dwarf trying to buy Shale – Maker’s Breath – they were back at Tapsters to weight their options. They did sit at a different table this time, but still. It was the same commotion and whirl of voices with Corra rushing from table to table to satisfy the demand for questionable beverage made of moss and other things.

Needless to say, the second day within Orzammar had been as a negative experience as the first was. Well at least the folk here respected the Warden Order, so points for not getting spat on and treated as traitor. Silver linings and all that.

Alistair leaned back in his stone-carved seat and observed the shadowed, rocky ceiling overhead with a sigh. Stones, that was all there was. Stones and Maker-damned politics they should not have a part in, ever. “I don’t like it!” slipped from his mouth before stopping himself.

“How very eloquent.” Ugh, the damn witch took it as invitation to add her own comment. “You are aware that this stalemate is only to be concluded by aiding the candidate to gain kingship, I hope?”

His eyes fixed hers, narrowed a bit. “Yes, Morrigan, that is exactly the part I don’t like. Wardens do not meddle in politics.”

“And missing the chance to indebt the future ruler of Orzammar to the Wardens far past the Blight, even? You are a narrow-minded fool for not seeing the chance that lies within here. Tis nothing new, but –“

“Enough!” Leliana spoke up, though leveled her gaze toward her plate of food right after. “The dwarves are most experienced in fighting the darkspawn, so we need their help. Which also means we have to play along with their rules.”

“Maybe you want to explain to me what they are, shem. Because I might not be able to comprehend them on my own with my tiny elf-brain.” Every word of Lenya was as sharp as her weapons, meant to showcase her contempt for the bard sitting at the farthest corner of the table,
away from his fellow Warden. Safety distance. Smart.

“How many times do I have to apologize for my slip of tongue?” Leliana let her head sink into her hands with a sigh. “I never intended to imply that you or your people are stupid, Lenya. Elves in Orlais are well-trained, nimble and -”

Maker, why was she so keen on digging a bigger hole for herself? “You may want to stop there, unless you want to be shoved into a lava pool outside.”

“Is this a threat?” Blue eyes widened, she gasped out. “From you, of all people?”

“No.” Alistair quickly raised his hands to placate her shock. He just knew Lenya... well, sort of. She had been rightfully upset when Leliana put a foot in her mouth for the first time yesterday. And now she was doing it again, without even noticing. Huh, this was normally something he excelled in. It was weird to not be the one causing trouble with his words, but trying to contain it, for once. “Only a fair warning, for your health and all. Because my fellow Warden is understandably off-put by your clumsily chosen words, even if you mean no harm.”

“Aww...” Lenya showed him a smile, all teeth and fake and creepy. Her voice adapted a faux sweetness to emphasize her annoyance. “You have me all figured out, huh?”

Right, he made the mistake to speak for her. She hated that. So much for mediating and possibly ending the conflict lingering in their midst. Though as stubborn as Lenya was, he could rather convince the archdemon to go back to sleep than achieving, well, that. The least he could do now, was not to raise to her bait and diffuse the situation. Maker help him. “I don't think a single Blight is long enough to do that, to be honest,” he replied, finding amusement within the truth of it. This woman was an enigma, a contrary person trading honest smiles and words underneath layers and layers of scowls and hostility. “But I do love the challenge of it.”

“W-what?” Lenya gasped, a shock of another kind than Leliana’s display of it colored her voice. Wait... did he really say that out loud? Crap, now he was the one taking a lava bath soon, right? And it would be well deserved, especially with his voice doing the thing that was extra unintended, on top of the general inadvertence of it all. With eyes wide open, she stared at him for a moment. A hint of a blush dusted her freckles, rivaling the heat creeping within in his own cheeks. Maker take him and He probably planned to as much as his heart raced against his rib cage right now.

Well, dropping dead now would be more graceful than whatever would follow, something painful, for sure. But Lenya had no sharpness left for him, neither in words nor blades. Instead she took a big gulp out of her cup of honey wine, breaking their eye contact at last.

That was... huh. He lacked the words to describe it and maybe it was better if he didn’t dwell on it. Glass shattered on the ground, centering his focus toward the back of the tavern. “Hands off, you sodding brontos!” A red-headed dwarf with messy hair and beard flailed in the midst of a group of armored men, trying to resist as they carried him toward the tavern’s exit.

“You have disturbed the patrons here for the last time, Oghren,” one of them said, while another opened the door. “Get your drunken ass out of here!” The dwarf hit the ground with a thud as the other men threw him out, followed by his colorful curses that even continued through the door one of them closed behind himself. Huh, what an odd fellow.

“… makes the most sense.” Alistair turned back toward Leliana, just as the commotion at the entrance slowly dispersed within the tavern’s usual din. Not in time to catch all of her words, though.
“Sorry, can you repeat that?”

She sighed, but honored his request. “Harrowmont is probably best option to bet on to end the stalemate. After all he sent a servant with with a gift basket to our quarters yesterday.”

“Yes, purely done from the good of his heart, I’m sure.” Ugh. She did not deserve his frustration, the harshness in his tone. It was just that about everything here in Orzammar turned out to be tedious and annoying, not as planned. Even going to the Assembly Chambers brought no progress to their quest of speaking to someone authorized to end this stalemate. Mostly because their king had had a terrible timing of dying and left his succession unclear. … Wow, this sounded way too familiar for comfort. He shuddered. Nope brain, we are not thinking of that! Of course, now where he refused to do so, the thoughts kept flooding his mind. Pictures of himself on a throne and people with endless demands all lined up for an audience. “No!” he blurted, near a scream in volume. Maker, no! Alistair’s hand trembled as he brought it to his face, to shield himself from all the stares now focused on him alone.

“So you want to support Bhelen instead?” Underneath the drum of his heartbeat within his ears, Leliana sounded confused. He shook his head, almost laughing at himself. This was ridiculous. There was no way in Thedas this could even happen to him. There was Eamon and many others, far more qualified people than himself for… that. And he was a Warden and Wardens were not meant to meddle in politics. It never would be happening, nope. “After he already tried to deceive us by proxy?”

Ah yes, that. Bhelen’s second had been the reason they made the detour to the dwarven shaperate in the first place, to check the legitimacy of some shady documents handed to Lenya by him. And to no one’s surprise whatsoever, they turned out to be forged. Not only did Bhelen’s man lie about the purpose of these papers, but also tried using them for his own gain. All in the name of showing their loyalty to the “true heir”. Yeah, right. Needless to say, Gavorn could be glad that Lenya didn’t decide to force-feed the document to him upon returning to the Assembly Chambers.

Alistair glanced back to his fellow Warden, his smile fond. It had been close to it, though, as furious as she had been. Lenya hated lies. That was another thing he’d learned about her today. Not that it was something out of the ordinary because who didn’t, but still… every piece of information about her was hard-won and therefore… precious, in a way. Noticing his eyes upon her, her brows drew together to a frown and he quickly busied himself with taking a gulp from his tankard. The ale was watery, but thankfully not dwarven in nature. Putting his beverage back down on the table, he shrugged, amused. “Nah. I doubt Bhelen would still want to see us anyway. Not after Lenya ripped his precious papers into tiny bits and threw it into his second in command’s face.”

She sat up straighter, her frown shifting to a scowl. “Got a problem with that, puppy?”

“Oh no, not at all.” Leaning back, Alistair clicked his tongue. “I quite enjoyed the show, to be honest.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Yeah, what did he mean, exactly? Maker he should stop saying everything on his mind.

“That... only Harrowmont is left now to turn to?” Damn it. There was really no choice than to play along with the dwarves’ rules, huh? “I still don’t like it, though. Wardens aren’t supposed to meddle in politics.”

“Yeah, we were also not supposed to be on our own, Alistair.” While her words were harsh and reactionary like so often when she disagreed, her features softened. “Just let us do whatever gives us these damn troops, so we can leave again. Quickly.”
“Not a fan of all the stone around you, I take it?”

Lenya gave him what he had started to call The Look; a pointed stare at first, ending with a roll of her eyes and a faint sigh. It was so typical her that another smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Fine, agreed. Harrowmont, it is. But I’m drawing the line at him asking me to dance the Remigold,” Alistair said and drank from his ale. “Let’s go there after we finished our meal, then.”

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes: Everything has been rewritten, better paced because summarized instead of being spelt out in detail. The focus has been redirected toward Lenya, Shale and Alistair for very good reasons ;)

Thank you for reading. Let me know what you liked, or not in the comments. Kudos are much appreciated as well.
Clevermind

Chapter Summary

In between navigating cultural differences and dealing with her fellow Warden, Lenya has to find Harrowmont's two fighter, who dropped out of the Proving battle due to Bhelen's blackmail. She might as well make it worth her time ;)

Chapter Notes

The band Poets Of The Fall has been a huge inspiration with their music, while writing the OG version of OEaH. So to honor that tradition in the rewrite, I will from now on pick my chapter titles from their song and album names and always link back to the respective song I used.

PotF-Clevermind

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harrowmont’s estate was far more luxurious and spacious than the Warden's quarters ever could be. Each of their companions were led to their own rooms after they'd made their intentions clear to the noble’s second, which name Lenya couldn't bother to remember. Even Shale fitted through the estate’s door, but had opted to remain in the main hall. Probably to scare unsuspecting servants passing by the golem. It surely would find something to amuse itself while she and her other companions used the new stay for some well-deserved rest. Which was part of the problem, sort of.

Lenya’s eyes narrowed as she poked the bed in front of her once more. What weird concept it was, for people to sleep so high above ground. And the mattress was way too soft, too. How could anyone lie in it without being half-swallowed by it in the night?

“Something the matter, my lady?”

Lenya turned to the dwarven woman, clouded in shadows. It wasn’t the same servant they had encountered in the dwarven quarters, but her face masked the same faux friendliness. Must be part of the job, then. “No, just not used to –“ she made a sweeping gesture. “...all this.”

“It is quite grand, isn’t it?” Grand wouldn't be a word Lenya would use to describe the interior and decoration. Dark, maybe. Angular, certainly. Small glowstones set in sconces on the wall here and there were all that illuminated the room. Enough for her to see, sure, but the light here remained muted and covered everything in slight shadows. No comparison to the harsh, red glow of Orzammar's streets and least of all, the sky outside. When would she ever see that again, though? These two days already seemed like an eternity, under all the stone.

“Yeah, very nice,” she remembered to say, all too hasty.
“First time here in Orzammar, huh?” The woman shrugged. “Don’t worry, you will get used to it. And your kind is always welcome here.”

Lenya backed away a bit, irked. She had heard stories how shemlen spoke of her kind and had experienced herself, in parts. Knife ear. Exotic and nimble. Pleasant to look at. All thinly veiled non-compliments; small pleasant sounding aggressions meant to remind and put her back into her place. Below them. Assholes. She hadn’t expected dwarves to think the same way, though. Ugh. “M-my *kind*?”

“You are a Warden, so yes.” Oh. Oh. She meant that. It was kinda a relief to hear this, as much as she still disliked her new-ish role and identity forced upon her. “You thought I meant…” the dwarf left the sentence hanging while her brown eyes grew bigger. “No, by the stone, *no*. You are here as Harrowmont’s honored guest and Warden first. No one cares for the other details, my lady.”

The woman said it with such an implicitness, but in truth, up there, it was always the other way around. Maybe Orzammar wasn’t so bad after all. “I see.”

Her small shoulders relaxed and she showed her a smile. “You are here to fight in the Proving for my lord tomorrow?”

Ugh, that. Hopefully she just had to find the fighter Bhelen had intimidated into dropping out the tournament. Lenya had no intention to be turned into a mascot for Harrowmont’s shitty quarrel for throne. “How do you know?”

“If there is one thing you have to learn about Orzammar, Warden, it is that word travels very fast. My name is Olissa, by the way.”

“Lenya…” she mumbled and extended her hand toward her, which she took. Olissa was a woman about twice her age, with hard angles in her features but warm brown eyes. Just like… – Revas gave a sharp, pointed bark, interrupting this thought. Lenya laughed out loud. “And this is Revas, my mabari.”

“Curious. Never have seen such a creature before. It is almost as large as a bronto. Serves you well in battle, I take it?”

She ruffled the dog’s head. “Yes, and otherwise too, as a friend.”

“I see.” Olissa clasped her hands. “I didn’t mean to keep you, Warden, and I won’t. Let me show you how you can fill up your bathtub with water.”

“The… what now?”

The dwarf frowned. “You people don’t have bathtubs on the surface? Where do you bathe, then?”

“In rivers. Lakes. Open waters. What else?”

“Ah.” She waved Lenya over to a separated corner of the room, adjutant from the door. Olissa pointed at an elongated container, just large enough for a person to sit in. Like everything in this room it was carved from stone, its surface smooth, light marble. “Here, we use this to clean up.”

But why? The question lay upon her tongue. It made no sense. Why would anyone want to sit in their own dirtied ass-water for any amount of time? Was it a saving space or resources thing? In any case, the whole concept of it was… gross. Instead to vocalize her concern, she watched Olissa waving her hand over some sort of… rune and suddenly clean water started filling up the tub. Out of thin air, basically. Wow.
“It is a simple enchantment, really,” the woman explained with a smile, noticing her surprise. “Our shapers have specialized in them and they have proven invaluable for us.”

“I can imagine why...” Lenya muttered, still staring at the tub filling itself as if by magic. Or due to magic, more like. “This shit is...awesome.” And the possibilities of it while being on the road! She slanted her head a bit and squinted at the rune. Would it be very noticeable when it would go missing? It could be seen as donation to the Wardens, right?

“They were mostly developed for the Legion of the Dead, so they have always clean water down in the Deep Roads,” Olissa continued to explain. “But as you can see the runes have also practical use for everyday life, of course.”

“Why aren’t these everywhere?”

“Do your people, the Dalish, readily share their secrets with everyone?”

Lenya’s head shot up, eyes wide. “What?”

“Don’t be so surprised, I read a lot,” she said, her laugh warm and amused. “It pays to be curious about the world beyond your boundaries. Besides, Nithius, Harrowmont’s court mage, lived with a Dalish clan for a time. And he can never shut up about it.”

Another elf? Down here? Huh. “I see, and no, we don’t do that. The shemlen are the reason why so much of our history is lost, after all.” Assholes.

“Here there are the darkspawn to blame for our losses, but I am glad you understand why we don’t generally distribute the runes to the surface. You are a smart young woman, Warden, and it warms my old heart to see you among the order.”

“I… –” This was unexpected, being welcomed and acknowledged. “You are not old,” Lenya said instead. And Olissa wasn’t. Just a streak of gray here and there in her black hair and laughing lines running along her mouth and eyes. She wasn’t gray like Ashalle or – no, not thinking about this, or them, now.

“Ah, flattery. Thank you nonetheless for your kind words, my dear.” She waited until the water had filled up the tub enough, then waved her hand once more over the rune and the water stopped running. “By the stone, I forgot the rune to heat the water. Let me fetch it for you, so you can take your bath and sleep. We need you rested for tomorrow, after all.”

“A heating rune? You durgen’len have a rune for everything, huh?”

Olissa chuckled. “Sadly not everything, dear.”

Revas whined, diverting her attention from watching the dwarven woman leaving back to her hound. “Yeah, it is strange, I know.” All of it was. The wobbly, way too tall, too soft bed or the elongated container of warm water to sit in. Lots of what was common to the durgen’len was foreign to herself. With a shrug, Lenya started to unclasp the many buckles and parts of her armor. Strange or not, being able to get out of it and cleaning up properly was nice, for a change.

“There you are!”

He should have knocked, maybe, but Alistair didn’t want to wake her and be stabbed to death in doing so. And it wasn’t as if he had waited long in the hallway anyway. Juuuust a bit.
Lenya’s eyebrows did their scrumpy thing, like so often when he addressed her. “Did you wait for me, puppy?” Unlike him, she wasn’t wearing her Warden armor, and the baggy tunic hanging loose over her hips dwarfed her in height and mass. He was smarter than to be fooled by her seemingly frail appearance though. Not after that one morning where he stumbled over her exercising… the dense muscles of her bare back taut and – He cleared his throat.

“No… yes. Kind of?”

“You do know how to knock, right? With you humans having doors everywhere and all.”

“Right… sorry. I didn’t want to disturb your sleep, I suppose.” Alistair tilted his head a bit with an exhale. Damn why was he nervous? There was nothing to be nervous about. “A-are you sleeping alright?”

Her eyebrows furrowed further. “Why are you asking?”

“The taint thing, mostly. Combined with being so close to the Deep Roads, this is not a good mixture for us Wardens.”

“Ah, that.” Lenya glanced away, as if the answer were written upon the shadowy stone walls. While it felt like morning after sleeping… well, badly, but without the sun in Orzammar it was hard to determine the time of day. She gave him a pointed look. “Is this why there are dark circles under your eyes?”

Blunt as always, huh? “Yeah, I struggled to find sleep last night. Ever since we arrived here, to be honest.” He sighed. “Normally my meditation routine is enough to block the voices and dreams out, but now… now it does not suffice. And it must be worse for you, I guess.”

“Aw, worried about me?” Her voice adapted a sugary sweet tone, along with a smile that seemed a bit fake, just for show.

“Yes, of course,” he rushed to say. “Why would I not be? You are the only other Warden aside of me.”

Leaning against the wall with runic carvings overhead, she shrugged. “As everyone likes to remind me, yeah.”

“Also you joined while being already blighted and during the Blight. This has got to be even more taxing for you… and I was wondering…” Say it. Say it you coward. “… if you need any help?”

She failed to reply for a moment, which then stretched into something longer. Alistair looked at her and started a bit as their gaze met. The same dark circles lay under her eyes, and her hair, while already bound to a knotted ponytail, was far more in disarray than usual. Either she hadn’t been up for long, or not hadn’t been sleeping at all. The second option was the far worse one of the two, of course. Lenya drove a hand through her face and broke their eye contact in this way. “I’m not sleeping well, no,” she admitted and repeated the motion one more time. “But I haven’t for weeks, so this is nothing new, puppy.”

He took a step back, to give her some room. Maybe to himself too. The air was stuffy and even all that space available in Harrowmont’s estate could not change that fact. “Yes, well, this is something I wanted to ask you for days now.”

“Oh?”

“You don’t seem to be the meditating type –“
Because you don’t talk much. Instead to voice this thought, he focused back on his initial words. “… and mentioned being restless, which is another side-effect of the Joining. I’m not the best in sitting around either and some extensive training could help to find better rest for both of –”

“All these words… only to ask me to spar with you?” she interrupted him with a groan and a shake of her head. Wow, she really managed to make sense out of this mess of words blurted out. “Why so complicated?”

“Because…” You are scary. “… I don’t want you to think I see you as incompetent in battle, or otherwise. You are not, far from it.” That was the other truth of it, wasn’t it?

“I never had this impression of you, Alistair.” Heat rose within his cheeks upon the way she said his name. Damn it. She had turned it into an effective weapon through rareness. Like a dog being praised for being good. He should dislike it due to that, though the honesty within her voice made it impossible.

“I simply noticed that you struggle a bit against opponents of, well, my size and with heavy armor.”

“Fair.” Huh. He had expected her to protest much more. “I do, since in my clan –” Hurt flitted across her expression and settled as a scowl in her face. “…Well, I am simply not used to fight against giants like you.”

Alistair shifted on his feet. Lenya was a head and a half shorter than him, only reaching up to his upper chest. And yes, he was tall, ever since that sudden growth spurt happened in his teens. But a giant? “Hello, have you met Sten, or Shale? They deserve that name far more than me!”

“Details, details.” She shrugged. “This why you struggle against more fast and dexterous enemies, then?”

Ah, she noticed. Of course she would. “Soooo, I give you some pointers what to do better and you do the same for me? We can help each other out this way, to get better and more efficient in battle.”

The scowl vanished, while a hint of amusement stayed. It was amazing how much her face revealed about herself, if one was used to her more subtle expressions. “And what has this to do with the darkspawn nightmares?”

So she had them, after all. It would have been a surprise, if not. “Physical exercise helps to rest easier at night. Less reason to jog around in the night or do pull ups on tree branches, maybe?”

Lenya scoffed. “Not that I would find any trees here anyhow.”

“So, do we have a deal, dear Warden sister?”

“Ugh, I am not your sister, human.”

It had been natural with the others to call each of the Wardens ‘brother’, though was much less so with Lenya, for some reason. “True, that… sounded a bit weird,” he admitted. “Sorry about that.” To lighten the mood again, Alistair raised his small finger toward her. “Pinky promise you will train with me?”

“How old are you? Twelve?”
“Nah, twenty.”

“A year older than me then. Figures.”

So, she was indeed close to his own age. Good to know. “About what?”

Stemming herself away from the wall with one foot, she used the momentum to move toward the main hall. “You are two times my senior and still I’m the one who should lead.”

Not that argument again, please. They had been there before, no need for a repeat. “Now you make me sound like forty,” he deflected.

“Maybe you are...” she imitated a voice that distantly resembled Leliana’s Orlesian accent. “It is hard to tell with you huuumaaaans.” She was still angry then with the bard. No surprise there. It was also a mockery of humans, who used to say the same about elves. Lenya stopped and turned on her heels so suddenly, he nearly ran into her. She frowned. “What is with your get up, anyway? Expecting a battle soon?”

“Weeell,” he drawled, stepping away a bit. Donning his armor in the morning was a habit done without thinking, to be honest. Even here, as safe as Orzammar appeared to be, he didn’t hesitate to continue this routine. “Given it is nearly time for us to leave towards the Proving Grounds to search for Harrowmont’s men, it feels safer to do so.” He pointedly looked at her and arched an eyebrow. “You however, seem to be a bit underdressed for the task.”

“Why? I don’t need armor to kick someone's teeth in. Just my foot. And the durgen'len’s teeth are to find on half or more than half of your height too.”

Alistair’s mouth popped open without forming words. How should one reply to such a statement, anyway? Other than slowly backing away, of course.

“I’m coming with It as well,” Shale spoke up and stepped out of a main hall’s shadowed corner so suddenly that Alistair’s hand flew to the hilt of his sword. He narrowly avoided ruining his sword upon its stony skin by suppressing the reflex to draw it and, in effect, getting his head caved in by the golem. But Maker be damned, this was close! Shouldn’t a creature as big as Shale make more noise when moving around? “Pah, they say I make the servants nervous in standing about here.”

“Geez, can’t imagine why,” Alistair muttered under his breath, while his heartbeat hammered in his ears. Alas his words hadn’t been as silent as intended, since Shale’s head turned to him and its lava slits flinted even further.

“See…” Lenya said, far too cheery for her. “No armor needed. I have a golem.” She strode back to her room and opened the door to let Revas out. He jumped up and down and around her, glad about being reunited with her. “And a puppy.” She shot Alistair a look. “Two of them, in fact.”

Okay, this was Ferelden and thus some would be honored, but could she not compare him to a dog all the time? That would be great, thanks. She nudged his side as she passed him, which due to his armor had no impact. Her brief proximity and smile at him made up for the lack of contact, however. “Let’s go, then.”

Damn it. How was he supposed to be and stay mad at her for this nickname when she, well, was so nice about it? It was still... unusual to see a more carefree, relaxed side of her, but welcome. Very much so, indeed. Though in this case it was to hope that she wasn’t too carefree about it. But yes, of course he would step in, if needed. She was his fellow Warden, after all. And a very scary fellow Warden, at that. “Fine. Lead the way.”
Sten, for whatever reasons had decided to accompany them as well. Perhaps because he also had scared the servants way too much, like Shale did. Regarding how all the people they passed by on their way to the Proving Area in Orzammar's commons gaped at the ragtag group, it seemed highly probable.

“Don't you ever talk?” As tall as Alistair already was, Sten was still a good head taller than him, forcing him to look up. The Qunari walked silently, his eyes fixed straight ahead. He gave no indication of having heard his words, so Alistair tried anew and elaborated further. “You know, make polite conversation just to put people at ease?”

Sten only let out a scoff. “You mean that I should remark upon the weather before I cut off a man's head?”

Yikes. What else had he expected to hear from the Qunari? He should have seen that reply coming. “Shaking his head, he let out a sigh. “Never mind.”

“Excuse me,” a dwarf in a... chantry robe? stepped into Lenya’s way, briefly before reaching the Proving Chambers. Huh, this was an unexpected sight, for sure. “I am Brother Burkel of the Redcliffe Chantry, returned to my ancestors’ land to spread the Chant of Light.” She stopped dead in her track, her whole posture tensing. Alistair stood behind her so her face was hidden from his sight, but he would bet all his money on her scowling right now. “I am petitioning to open a Chantry in Orzammar,” he continued as no reaction from Lenya ensued. Oh great, this dwarf really had a dead wish.

“Ugh, even with all the stone overhead and far underneath the earth, there is no escape to this shit.”

“And this is something to rejoice about, sister,” Brother Burkel replied, selectively ignoring her swearing. Alistair took a large step forward, to stand next to Lenya. Just in case.

A moment passed without reply, without her posture relaxing. It was the opposite even. She made herself taller in front of the dwarf, hands balled to fists at her sides. “Is it now?” Oh, oh, here we go. “Like it was for my people, being chased away from our homeland and slaughtered for not singing the Chant of Light, but our own songs, to our own gods? For having a different faith than your Chantry deemed acceptable? Is this something to rejoice about too, when you are attempting the same now with the durgen’len?”

“I’m not trying to – … and there has been resistance to it anyway,” he sputtered, backing away from the rage vibrating upon her skin, from her whole self.

“Good.” Lenya slanted her head, her stare toward him cold and pointed. “Because I’m not helping you to spread your fucking lies. Leave the durgen’len be, or else –” Maker, did he imagined it, or did her gaze flicked to the lava pool behind Burkel?

“Lenya…” Alistair spoke up to get her attention and hinder her from drop-kicking the dwarf into the lava, if possible. “We are running late to find Harrowmont’s fighter in the Provings. Let’s go, shall we?”

Being addressed by him, her posture relaxed, however slightly. Huh, interesting. “Fine. Lead the way, then.”

“Should I crush Its tiny head?”

Stopping, Lenya looked over her shoulder to the golem. “Nah, not this time, Shale. But thanks for
“Sorry, Brother Burkel,” Alistair said to the man, while trying to usher both, bloodthirsty golem and angry Dalish, on their way. “We cannot help you.”

I see, Warden.” He sighed, shaking his head. “Alas, the way of the Chantry is forever lost to my people, then.”

“Good. This Chantry encourages faith in an unknown god instead of understanding oneself. The qun is the only way —“

“Oh shut up, Sten,” Lenya groused, without even turning around to the Qunari, who grunted in disapproval, but still complied.

“Look Warden, I already told the proving master I withdrew,” a dwarven man clad in simple leather armor looked up to Alistair, as they stepped too close to him in the proving chamber. His braided, brown beard twitched as he spoke. “So why are you keeping harassing me?”

Sten stared down to the rather unassuming man. "I thought their warriors, at least, would be bigger."

“They are quite puny, aren’t they?” Shale agreed with far more amusement than the situation permitted. “Even more so than the Painted Warden Elf. I wonder what sound they will make when I squi —“

“I have never seen you in my life,” Lenya interrupted the golem and also ignored how the man did not address her, but Alistair as Warden instead. Good, that would teach him to underestimate her. Hopefully in non-bloody terms, for once. Folding her arms in front of her chest, she glanced about, before fixing her gaze back on the man with a scowl.

The dwarven warrior wasn’t the only person populating the vast hall, not by far. At each side of the large hearth fire in the middle stood a bulk of people, waiting for the event to begin. Their excited chatter was only matched in volume by a vendor with a roasted nugs stall at the entrance of the hall. Alistair’s stomach growled, taunted by the smell of roasted meat. Come to think of it, he had forfeited most of his breakfast in favor of getting armored up and ready to meet with Lenya. Damn. And people still asked why he wasn’t the one leading?

“An… elf?” The man’s beady eyes shifted to a frown when he finally acknowledged her presence. And he did not stop there, as his gaze wandered further upwards to the Qunari, then over to Shale. “A giant and a talking golem?”

“I applaud Its observation skills,” the creature remarked, dry as ever.

Revas gave a short, sharp bark, seemingly offended of being ignored. He backed away a bit at that. “… W- who are you people?”

“Depends on who you are, durgen’len,” she scoffed. “One of Harrowmont’s fighter who withdrew from this stupid tournament, obviously.”

“I see Its observation skills are as equally as sharp.”

Ignoring Shale’s more than backhanded compliment, Lenya began tapping her foot. Oh, oh, never
a good sign. “Whatever it was that made you drop out, forget about it!”

“I... can’t.” Shaking his head, the man let out a sigh. “Look, when I was younger -“

“I’m not here to hear your life story, durgen’len. I’m here to ensure you are battling in the arena.”

“This is easy for you to say, elf.” Her eyes narrowed upon him at that. “… Warden?” he corrected, a bit unsure. “But Bhelen is blackmailing me and left me no choice than to withdraw. That is what I’m trying to tell you.”

“I see,” Alistair spoke up. It was time to defuse the situation a bit and get more information. “How so? The blackmailing, I mean.”

“I love a woman, who is married to a prominent deshyr’s heir.” Of course, politics. Great. “Revelka Aeducan. Lesser Cousin, nowhere near the throne. We had a thing going on years back, and we should have stopped seeing each other long ago…” He paused to rub his forehead. “… but we didn’t.”

“Oh.” This took an unexpected turn. Well, somewhat, anyway. Blackmail always was either about forbidden love and/or power. Maker, he hated politics. “What has Bhelen in the hand against you?”

“They have letters, love letters Revelka wrote me.” The dwarf winced. “If they were made public, she would be disgraced. Her husband would cast her aside and I would be lucky to be allowed to die in a duel.”

“Ugh.” Lenya spun around, ready to leave. “Well, good luck with that, then.”

“What are you doing?” Once more she caught him offhand. “We need him.”

“So I thought too, puppy, but I changed my mind. Being unable to keep it in his pants is his problem alone.”

True, it was. So much they could agree on. But it still didn’t solve their issue of needing fighters for Harrowmont in the arena. Him, to be exact. “Wait,” said man called after her, managed to indeed stop her in her tracks. “I know these mistakes are of my own making and my cousin now has to suffer for it. Seeing how I am unable to support him as planned.” Cousin? Alistair turned back to him, frowning. So he was a Harrowmont himself, then? Come to think of it, the lord’s second did mention a fighter with the same name. What was it again?

Oh right. “You are Baizyl, then?”

“Yes.” He nodded, a bit confused. “I thought we’d established that already.”

“Not by name, no. Mine is Alistair, by the way.” He pointed at Lenya’s back. It was tense again, her posture motionless but attentive. She was, without a doubt, listening. “And this is my fellow Warden, Lenya.”

“What?” She whirled on the balls of her feet, around to him. “Do you plan to sit down and have a tea now?”

Disregarding her comment for a second, Alistair looked at the Qunari, who was standing still like Shale did. “See, Sten, this is what I meant earlier, with putting people at ease.”

“Pah,” he only scoffed. “Pointless.”
“Bhelen’s fighter Myaja has the letters,” Baizyl said, cutting into any attempt of a retort. “If you make sure she’ll not show them to anyone, I will fight for Harrowmont again.”

“How much?” Alistair asked in unison with the man. She would not do this, or would she?

“I’m asking what retrieving these letters are worth to you.” Her eyes flicked to Baizyl’s face then, staring at him. “Fighting a Blight doesn’t come cheap, you know?”


Lenya continued to unblinkingly stare him down, deliberately waiting till Baizyl started to shift on his feet. “Twenty.”

The breath caught in his throat, causing Alistair to cough. Maker’s breath, the nerves of that woman!

The man seemed to be equally as puzzled. Shaking off his bewilderment after another moment, Baizyl nodded. “…agreed. If this saves her and my hide… this is a price I am willing to pay.”

Alistair glanced back and forth between the two, his heart beating fast. Wow? For real now? No, better to not question it.

“Deal, then.” She shrugged and petted Revas’ head. “Where are we to find this person?”

“Myaja?” Baizyl pointed toward the heavy set of doors across of him. “Most likely in the fighter’s quarters. But hurry Warden, once the first bouts have started, registration will be closed.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Lenya waved him off and walked toward the door.

Alistair followed her and waited till they were out of Baizyl’s earshot to speak up. “Don’t you think you overdid it a bit there, Lenya?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, not stopping.

“Twenty sovereign just for getting his letters back? Really?”

“You… don’t know?” By the way she frowned at him, she really didn’t. Right, so far it had always been him, Leliana or Morrigan buying supplies from the merchants. Lenya didn’t seem to have a sense for money value, like… at all. What was that about? “Oh. Yeah, it is. Very much, even.” He clicked his tongue. “Still, it doesn’t feel right to be paid to undo his blackmail. Which would have been our task either way.”

“Great. And now we are going to get paid for these stupid love letters, at least.”

He let out a snort. “You are such a romantic.”

“Love is foolish,” she stated, matter of fact, and opened the doors to the fighter’s quarters. “It is what got my mother killed, after all.” Alistair stopped in his tracks, blinking slowly. What now? He continued to stare at her retreating back, even as all the others passed him by. Sten and Shale did so with a disapproving grunt, while Revas ignored him, too busy vying for his mistress’ attention.
How could she drop *this* on him, as if talking about the weather? Sometimes her way was still too much for him, no matter how much he tried to adjust to her capricious manners, each time anew.

“Are you coming?” Her voice was dulled through the heartbeat thrumming in his ears, though suffice to free him from his stupor. Why was he so bothered by it anyway? It was none of his business, after all.

“Y-yes,” he managed and let the door shut closed behind him.

Finding the love letters, stored behind a closed door in a chest, was a lot easier due to Lenya’s “I-don’t-need-a-key-I-have-a-golem” policy, admittedly. Even with all the ruckus and damage Shale caused to the hall’s door and the surrounding building structure, the opposing fighters didn’t dare to approach them any further. Sometimes having a golem in their party had its advantages.

“How dare you?” Ah, this must be Myaja then, who glared at Lenya from some safe distance, together with her brother. “This is trespassing and theft.”

“Nah, more like getting back what hasn’t been yours in the first place.”

“I should have you thrown into the Deep Roads, elf,” she spat, furious. “Feed you and all of Harrowmont to the darkspawn.” Oh Maker, that dwarven woman had really no idea to whom she was talking to here, huh? Figures.

“Oh, if I were you,” Alistair said, stepping in between Myaja’s and Lenya’s line of sight. “I would be careful how you speak to my fellow Warden.” This was nothing more than a friendly reminder, not a threat. Revas was less subtle and followed his words with loud growling and baring his fangs.

Both dwarves’ look flitted from one companion to the next, then back to him. “Gloat all you like, Warden. It won’t be for long, as we will grind your bones to dust, given the chance.”

“Proof it!” Sten hissed, his hand close to the scabbard with his greatsword.

“Not now.” The other dwarf clasped her shoulder with his hand to hold her back. “There will be time for this later, Myaja!”

“Fine, later then,” she agreed, however reluctant. “Come on, brother. We have a fight to prepare for.” She whirled around with a huff and stalked away.

“The painted Warden elf does let them go? Why wait to crush them?”

Lenya only scoffed from behind Alistair’s back. “I would have without a certain someone stepping in.”

Now he was to blame? Great. “Why thank you, Lenya. I was trying to help.”

“I can take care of myself, puppy.” Yes, he was aware, thank you very much. That didn’t mean he would let anyone speak about his fellow Warden in that way like Myaja did without to react. “I know. I was only trying to avoid ugly bloodstains on these letters we retrieved, you see.”

“This was impressive!” A man, clad in a set of heavy chainmail approached the group, interrupting Lenya’s reply. His beardless face was plump and square, and a few scars criss-crossed his very pale cheeks. “So the rumors are true then after all?” he continued talking, clasping his gauntleted hands together. “The Wardens support Harrowmont?”
“Who the fuck are you?” Lenya asked, ever so friendly.

“Oh sorry, Warden. My name is Gwiddon. I withdrew from fighting in Harrowmont’s name, but if the Wardens support him too, it means he hasn’t conceded the throne to Bhelen, then?”

Hah, two birds, one stone. “That is correct.”

“Good to know,” the dwarf said. “As warrior I didn’t want to get involved into petty politics and the Lord’s conceding to Bhelen would have brought shame over my house, had I fought for him in spite of it. Fortunately these kind of rumors were nothing but lies after all. Bhelen’s doing, no doubt.”

“So, does this mean you will enter the arena for Harrowmont again?”

Gwiddon nodded. “Yes, dear lady Warden. I see no further reason not to.”

“Well, good luck to you there, then,” Lenya replied, her tone indifferent. She turned to go. “Let’s get rid of these stupid letters.”

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

While adhering mostly to the canon questline here with added Lenya-ness, this chapter is completely new written. It serves mostly to showcase the cultural differences (bed and bathtub) and how Lenya starts to let her guards down around Alistair :)

Thanks so much for reading. Please let me know what you liked/what not in the comments.
Unable to watch Lenya fight without proper equipment, Alistair flees the Proving to get some supplies needed after her battle. More awkward situations ensue, new people are met and discoveries are made. Basically a normal day in Alistair's life, especially after meeting Lenya.

Chapter Notes

I'm like fifty days too late in publishing a new chapter, but living the procrastinating/depression life stuff like delays of two months in between publishing can happen, alas. TLDR: I'm shit in keeping a regular schedule with it, but what else is new.

Title is another Poets Of The Fall title, as linked below, because this is how I roll now. Thus every chapter will be titled after a song of them. Enjoy my very belated words fart? :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As she is beautiful, she's unpredictable
Damned irresistible, is it plausible to hate her
She is my common sense, revels on decadence
But what's the difference, it's impossible to bait her

- Poets Of The Fall - Miss Impossible

Alistair flinched as a loud murmur went through the crowd. This was torture. Hiding his eyes behind gloved hands, he could no longer watch. Bad enough that he had been rendered to a mere spectator to the fighting in the proving arena far below their seats. Much worse was that Lenya was the one partaking, without wearing any kind of armor or her own set of weapons. Leliana, who arrived just in time for the event to start, was way less fazed by it. Sitting next to him, she giggled and cheered Lenya on.

“You are missing everything, Alistair!”

“… Good! Let me know when it is all over?”

“Oh, please,” she said with a voice indicating a roll of her eyes. He wouldn’t glance up to check, though. “Have a little more faith in your fellow Warden. Lenya is an excellent combatant, armor or no.”

“Yes, but the no armor part is part of the problem here!” Why hadn’t she let him partake in her
stead, when a third fighter for Harrowmont went missing all the sudden? Why was she always so stubborn and unwilling to accept his help? It was so infuriating, especially since he was fully armed and armored up, unlike her in her flimsy, ill-fitting linen shirt and pants. But no! She had to do everything on her own, regardless of his readiness to aid and fitting equipment for the task.

“Oh!” Leliana shrieked and clasped her hands.


“The way she sidestepped that attack and did her own. Marvelous.”

“Why is that Warden battling for Lord Harrowmont not wearing any armor?” asked a deep voice behind him. Yes, why indeed? Ugh. “Is this a new rule I missed?”

“Nah,” said another, female voice next to him, laughing. “She already fought and won her first and second round this way. She is scrawny but very nimble, always a step ahead of her opponent.” The woman huffed out. “I should have placed my bet on her winning.”

“Oooh, by the stone, this is very impressive, then!” Someone, probably the same guy speaking, roughly patted his armored shoulder. “Good on you Wardens.”

Alistair turned around to the man and gave him a weak smile. Their confidence in and rooting for Lenya was flattering, but it did little to alleviate the heavy feeling in the pits of his stomach, nor calm the racing of his heart.

“They are not wrong you know?” Leliana agreed. “We may not see eye to eye, Lenya and I, but the way she is moving, avoiding and anticipating every attack is something else indeed.” Furious applause echoed through the hall and the proving master announced Lenya as the winner of the third round as well. He only called her ‘The Grey Warden’, which was why despite the lack of her armor, everyone here recognized her as such.

Alistair exhaled, dared to look down to the middle of the arena where she stood. Blond hair disheveled and her face smeared with dust whirled up from the ground by her movements, she rolled her shoulders. Her wiry back squared, she bore herself with the same confidence and boldness she always showed while fighting at his side. It was... something else, indeed. Maker. As if noticing his gaze, she glanced up to him and their eyes met. Arching an eyebrow, one corner of her mouth curled up to a smug smile destined for him. “You are impossible,” Alistair mouthed more than spoke, still holding her gaze. Despite her anew victory, his heart and pulse hadn’t calmed down one bit, was thrumming as frantically as ever in his chest and ears.

Next to him, Leliana giggled. “Your face is all red, Alistair. How cute.”

Oh, damn. When had his cheeks become so heated? He broke eye contact with his fellow Warden to throw Leliana a pointed look. “No surprise. I have one heart attack after another up here. This is so stressful!” Which was the truth, after all. Her being able to stand her ground or not, it was much easier to fight at her side than being forced to watch her fight without him.

She snorted, nodding toward Lenya below. “I doubt stress is the reason for you blushing like that.”

Ugh, that again? Alistair opened his mouth to retort, but the proving master cut him off with his announcement of the next and penultimate fight.

“This round, Harrowmont’s champion, The Grey Warden, takes on the notorious duo. The Warrior Caste’s twin terrors, now fighting for Prince Bhelen – Myaja and Lucjan!”
Oh no, them! And Lenya would have to battle both on her own? The gate opened, and the twins stepped out into the arena, but Baizyl followed close behind them. Alistair released his breath, relaxed a bit. Not on her own, then. Good. Despite his light leather armor, the dwarf favored a heavy axe as his weapon. Unsheathing it, he passed Myaja and Lucjan with a grin and stopped at Lenya’s side. He exchanged words with her and less friendly ones with the twins by the looks of it. The volume around Alistair were too bustling to make out what they were saying, though.

“Last one to stand will be declared victor! Fight!”

Only two more to go, thankfully. And time to stop looking, again. Head between his knees, Alistair’s heart jumped a bit with each outcry and round of applause of the public. Every minute it went on, was one minute too long. Lenya, by proxy, would definitely kill him before this was over.

“Oh...” Leliana exclaimed and slipped back into Orlesian tongue as she gasped for air. “Merde de chien. This was way too close!”

Do not jump down to help her, do not jump down – ugh. The fact aside that he would be no use to her with two broken legs whatsoever, it would also hinder their efforts of acquiring Harrowmont’s trust and troops for the Blight. But still can it be over soon, please? He didn’t pray often to the Maker on his own these days, nope. The Chantry and hours and hours of Chant of Light recitation had beaten that out of him in his teens, sometimes literally, but right now? Now he wanted to, if only to have something –

“And the winner is The Grey Warden and Baizyl Harrowmont, in the name of Lord Harromont.”

The proving master announced their victory, before Alistair could even pray for it. Good. He let go and dared to look up again, while the crowd cheered. Leliana gave him a weak half-smile and pointed toward Lenya. “It was close this time, due to their opponents using all tricks outside of the rule book. It was almost as if they really tried to kill her, instead to test strength against each other.”

Maker, this time, Lenya wasn’t smiling, nor enjoying her victory. Hunched over, with her hands on her knees, she fixed a point at the wall and glared at it. Her hair was in even far worse disarray than before, any resemblance of the messy bun she wore before gone. Alistair’s stomach sank, as if someone had fed him several stones and forced to swallow them. “They did.”

“What?”

“Tried to kill her, I mean.” The wear and tear of her shirt made it obvious. Not as obvious as the several cuts and bruises Lenya had suffered during the round did, of course. Noticing his gaze, she looked up to him. Smugness had made way for rage in her expression, each shaky breath was anger and furious determination. It was the defiant mask she adapted when things went into an unplanned direction she despised and yet had to take. Like now.

“Lenya...”

“You truly are worried...” Leliana muttered, a bit surprised. How should he reply to that? Of course he was, why was this still in question?

A soft hand touched his head, patted the back of his hair. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have teased you then.”

As disarming her friendly words and touch was, it did little to calm him down. There was still the final round to go and he wasn’t allowed to fight at her side. Only registered combatants could. Damn it. “She is... injured.”
“Yes, many scrapes and bruises, some cuts.”

“No, Leliana, look closer. See how she is holding her side and the way she has shifted her stance?”

Ugh, having an eye for these things through life-long training was today more a curse than a blessing.

She frowned. “Isn’t there something we can do? Ask for a break?”

“A break? Hah,” the dwarf behind them hollered. It was the same guy that patted his shoulders before. “There are no breaks in between the fighting, other than the servants carrying out the losers of battle.”

“Right… good to know.” It took him everything to not take a swing and punch the man in the face. Not only would have been a vast overreaction to his expressed amusement, but also destroy the positive image of the Wardens here. Unlike Lenya, alas, he was in full armor, bearing the griffon. He couldn’t—wouldn’t—do this. Duncan's memory deserved better.

Now that was a cheery thought. His face fell. The Warden quarters here in Orzammar were a stark reminder of what has been lost, so moving on to staying in Harrowmont’s estate had been such a relief. At least he didn’t cry himself to sleep in the past few days anymore. This was something, right? Come to think about it, Lenya had him too distracted to think much about Ostagar, and not in the way Leliana suggested, nope. More in a herding cats way, which was ironic since she hated cats and what was that about, anyway? Oh Maker, he was doing it again, trailing off with his thoughts. But maybe it was better than to watch his fellow Warden to having to fight another round with the last proving’s champion and Bhelen’s cousin, no less. There was nothing he could do to even help her—oh. “I have to go, Leliana,” he blurted, before stopping himself.

“What? Now?”

“Yes, Lenya will need bandages and, well, new clothes once the Proving is over.” And she survived it. Great, that unhelpful part of his brain was at it again. “I need to get supplies.” Not waiting for her reply, he already stood and moved through the range of seats like, as a dwarven noble woman had put it ‘a bronto in chase of food.’ No matter, getting Lenya help in the only way he was able to was far more important than the sentimentality of the crowd or his lack of grace in movements.

Alistair arrived at the estate not much later, with Revas trailing after him, more or less stealthily. “Huh, and here I thought you would be too busy sneaking scraps of the people around you to worry about Lenya.” The mabari growled low and annoyed, his brown bead eyes narrowed to a slit.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. Do not eat me too.” Great, here he was standing outside and in middle of Orzammar’s noble district talking to his giant dog companion. That was very Ferelden—and silly, at least according stares he got from the dwarven passerby. Oh well, he might go the whole way then. “Come then, Revas. I have got the package of bandages in my room.”

The poultices were collected quickly, but the matter of getting Lenya a change of clothes would be more complicated. After all, he could not barge into her room and rummage through her things to find them, right? Alistair pondered it for a minute or two, while excelling in his ability to stare off into space. Or in this case, at the closed door to the room Lenya was staying in.

"What are you doing, fool?"
He gave a start at that voice behind him, belonging to his least favorite person in their group and they included a children-murdering Qunari and bird-phobic, cynic golem. Kind of an achievement, really.

“Morrigan!” He turned with a smile too tight to fit to his faux-cheery voice. “Did you crawl out of your witchy cave just to startle me? Aww, you shouldn't have!”

Her mouth pursed, probably to fit to the look of disgust her other facial parts had already adapted. “Where is Lenya?”

He winced. “Still fighting. Final round.”

She shifted on her feet, her expression changing from disgust to, well, whatever that was her face now showed. Surprise? Concern? He wasn’t terribly keen to keep up with her moods. They were rotten at the best of days either way. “Look, it is wonderful to chat with you, but I need to get back to Lenya. You know, keeping her from bleeding out and all that,” he said as the silence stretched between them. Her presence was always unsettling and even more so when she stared at him as if planning to murder him in his sleep. No surprise if she’d truly attempt this soon and more one she hadn’t already.

“Tis troubling that the lord of this manor hides himself from us behind his second until we got through a series of arbitrary trails. One would think a contender to the throne would be more veracious with the people aiding him.”

On that, they could agree, but it was splitting hairs. This wasn’t the time, nor place to have an in-depth discussion about the mechanism of dwarven politics. Not that he would like to have an in-depth discussion with Morrigan about anything, at that. Except about all the ways she would leave him alone – which reminded him. “Oh, can you grab a new shirt and pants from Lenya’s things?”

She crossed her arms. “Why would I?”

Right. This again. “You would normally be the last person I’d ask, but alas you are also the only one here right now. Revas is sadly not able to do this.” The dog huffed at him, offended. He probably could, if shove came to push. Though, half-teared shirt or not, no one had use for slobbered through clothes, smelling like dog breath.

“And?”

“And, creepy or not, you are a woman,” he said, raising to her bait. “I would rather not rummage through my fellow Warden's personal things. As, you know, someone who is decidedly not female.” Maker did he truly have to spell it out for her? “Because, that would be also creepy, right?”

“Hmpf,” she made, her posture relaxing a bit. “Fine. Tis the question why she would need new clothes to begin with.”

“Because …” she wants to rather see me dying of a heart-attack than letting me fight in her place. “… she is battling in the proving without any kind of armor?” he settled for instead.

“What?” Well, this got a reaction out of her alright. “Tis unbelievable. This reckless fool, ugh.” Again, they could agree on something, which was slowly getting disturbing. “Fine,” Morrigan huffed, the word having more finality than before. “You wait here. Or not. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Nor to me, but here we are.” Alistair sighed, as she went into Lenya’s room. He should be going.
The witch had kept him long enough. “I will go ahead,” he announced into the empty space of the door frame. “The proving chambers are in the commons. Hard to miss with all the people and screaming, really.”

Before leaving, he stopped by his own room to grab a blanket. Better than having to rely on the Morrigan, of all people.

Followed by Revas, Alistair ran half the way back to the proving hall, afraid of being too late and worse. He couldn’t lose her too, not with Duncan and everyone else… gone. Shoving people aside with narrow a word of apology, he practically barged through the tall door leading to the chambers. Alistair’s eyes roamed through the hall, discovering Shale standing on one and Sten on the other side of the gate leading to the area. They were hard to miss, even in the sea of dwarves leaving their seats after the final match had ended. Only, ended how?

“By the stone, what a tournament!” said a woman passing him by, giggling. “Who would have thought the Warden to win in the end, with her lack of equipment and injuries? That takes some serious guts. Maybe Harrowmont is blessed by the ancestors after all.”

“Yes, the Wardens are… something else indeed,” her friend replied, giving Alistair a pointed look and smiled. His mind racing, he paid little attention to the friendly gesture. So she had won the proving and most importantly survived the ordeal. Thank the Maker! But at what cost?

“There you are,” Leliana hurried toward him, her advance halted by the sheer mass of people intending to leave the hall as well. “Good. You brought supplies?”

There was something in her voice that unsettled him. “Yes, unlike certain creepy witches I keep my word,” he said, pointing to the small bundle in his gloved hand and the blanket slung over his vambrace.

“Are these the only bandages you had?”

His stomach made a flip and not of the good kind. “Yes, why?”

Leliana’s face clouded. “You will see soon enough.”

“She fought bravely.” Okay, why was Sten talking about Lenya as if she had passed away? Why was no one giving him a straight reply?

“What an annoying commotion.” She eyed the people around her with disdain. “Tis over then, I take it? Of all the times he’d expected Morrigan to not care enough to actually appear, she did. How wonderful for him and his already sky-high, or rather, ceiling-high anxiety, ugh.

“What happened, Leliana? In less ominous words, please.”

“The last battle has been an ordeal and –“

The arena gate snapped open with a loud creak and his fellow Warden stumbled out, supported by Gwiddon and Baizyl at each side.

She wrangled free from their grasp. “I can walk on my own, thanks.”

“You are harder than any bronto I have seen, Warden. Good fight,” Gwiddon said and turned to leave. The other dwarf was more hesitant to do the same. Good. At least one of the trio possessed
common sense.

“Lenya!”

“’m fine, puppy. Stop yapping.”

She was the very definition of not fine. Wobbling unsteady on her feet, her shirt was torn to shreds for the most part and soaked in blood where a blade had cut too close. Shallow or not, there were far too many cuts all over her body. And this didn’t even entailed the condition of her face. What in the– “Fine? FINE?” His voice had gone shrill. That was it, he was losing his mind. Took him long enough. “Your. Nose. Is. Gushing. Blood.”

Lenya took what was left of her sleeve and wiped with it at her nose. “Ugh, this fucker got me with his shield, I guess.”

“You guess?” Yelling at her wouldn’t solve anything, but it was all he could think of, right now. “Like you guessed it would be fine to fight without armor or your weapons? Are you out of your mind?”

Bruises colored half of her face purple-blueish and one eye was nearly swollen shut. Nevertheless she glared up to him, defiant as ever. “I have won, didn’t I?”

“Yes, congratulation, Lenya. Well done, in almost killing yourself!”

“Alistair…” Leliana tried, though his name got half-lost to the ringing in his ears.

“Have you even stopped one moment and thought about that I’m here as well? That I could have fought in your stead, especially regarding my full armor and equipment?” The past hour of being rendered a bystander by his fellow Warden due to her resistance to accept any kind of help from him was finally taking its toll. “No, of course not, because you never –“

“Alistair!” Leliana chided, far louder and harsher than before, shutting him up. “This doesn’t help anyone.”

“Keep out of it, shem’alas!”

“No, I will not!” she retorted, shaking her head with a glare. “Look, I’m sorry for what I said yesterday, but you are being unfair and rude to the people worrie –“

“I… will call for a healer. Ancestors know the Warden here needs one,” Baizyl was the sole voice of reason, cutting off Leliana’s remark. “Wait here,” he said and fled the scene. He couldn’t blame the dwarf for wanting to get away from all that mess. Not when a part of him wanted to do the same.

“Ugh, I hate to agree with these fools, but look at you, Lenya!” Morrigan was the unexpected other voice of reason. Wow, what was next? Dancing mabari in tutus? Darkspawn politely excusing themselves from Blight participation? “You are barely able to stand.”

“Just scratches, bruises. Nothing serious,” she brushed off the witch as well. Holding her nose with one hand to stop the bleeding there, her other flew to her side, clutching it. The makeshift bandage ripped from the fabric of her shirt there was seeped through with her blood, coloring her hand crimson. She watched her own bloody hand with detached fascination, her motions and words sluggish. “Okay, maybe not only a scratch.”

Alistair rushed to her side and caught her before she could hit the ground as her knees gave in.
“Easy, there.”

“Are you done yelling now, or shall we wait till she bled out?” Morrigan roughly snatched the bundle with the bandages out of his hands. "Moron."

“’m fine,” Lenya slurred, blinking slowly. Even now she was still protesting aid. Or putting on an act of false braveness? What was that all about?

“Yeah I can see that,” he said, shaking his head. Maker, this woman was too stubborn for her own good.

“Hold her straight up, so I can bind her mid-section to stop the bleeding,” Morrigan commanded, deftly unfurling one of the bandages. “Tis easier than when she is sitting down.”

Doing as he was told – by Morrigan, no less– she ripped the lower part of Lenya’s shirt off, for better access. Alas, this was leaving his fellow Warden being less adequately dressed than before. Alistair cleared his throat and his wandering eyes somehow found Sten in the background, who stared unblinkingingly back at him. Great. No wonder he’d won I spy with himself in that cage. Oh wait, that had been a joke, right? It was so hard to tell with the Qunari and why was he waiting around anyway?

Lenya hissed when the witch removed the makeshift binding around her midst. His focus snapped back to her. In his arms. Maker. At least he was wearing armor so that helped, but she was still very close to him. She was sweaty, reeked of dirt and the coppery tang of blood. And still she was... pretty. Huh, where did that thought come from? And where did his anger go? It deflated like Lenya’s ability to stand upright did, and right in that moment too. “You are not the only Grey Warden here, do remember that, please. It is all I ask, really.”

“M’kay.” Her sluggish nod remained uncompleted, because her head bumped at his chestplate. She huffed at it for being in the way. It was… –

“You can sit her down now,” Morrigan announced, after fastening the bandage. “Slowly.”

“Right.” He gestured toward Leliana and in front of himself. “Could you…”

The bard grasped his intention – bless her – and spread the blanket out on the ground on which he settled Lenya down. “Thanks.”

“Careful, or you will worsen that wound,” said a deep, near husky voice behind him. Turning toward its source, the sound did not fit to picture of the man it belonged to. He’d expected a giant of seven foot at least, like Sten was, not a scrawny elf in a simple grey linen shirt and leather pants. To be fair, he was lanky, and his pointed ears and nose a bit too big for his oval face, but still. Looks could be deceiving. Or in his case: voices. The elf stepped closer, his smile warm. “I’m Nithius. Harrowmont’s house healer, if you will. I have been sent to- oh,” he stopped, his green eyes flung over to Lenya on the ground. “I see. So the word on the streets is true then. You’ve won the proving without – ”

“Creators, are you talking always so much?” Lenya interrupted his squall of gravelly words with her groan. “Why are there two of them now?” she asked, pointing at Alistair. Ah, so she was well enough to insult him again, then? Good to know.

“Don’t ask me, Lenya.” Morrigan threw her hands up. I did what I could… or must. Now I would prefer not to linger.”

“I would, though,” Nithius rasped, already proving his abysmal taste in smiling at the witch.”If you
would, that is.”

She only bestowed the elf with a disgusted huff and turned on her heels. Sten took her rushed leave as reason to do the same.

“I will not carry It back to the midget’s house,” Shale announced and trailed, or rather, stomped after the Qunari.

“That won’t be necessary, once we are done here. And if… well,” he looked up to Alistair. “I’m certain you can carry your –“

“She is not my girlfriend,” Alistair blurted, cutting into his sentence.

… fellow Warden back,” Nithius finished, raising one bushy eyebrow at him.

Oh. “Uh, err...” His mouth opened and closed like a fish stranded on land, his cheeks burning. Where was the pit of lava when you needed one?

“I think Alistair needs magical healing more than me,” Lenya piped up. “Since he broke himself. He tends to do that.”

The elf was trying to be polite in suppressing a laughter, but the snort coming through was telling. “Good to know.” Wow, way to make an impression. “Although in my professional opinion as a spirit healer, you need my attention far more, lethallan.”

Lenya’s hand stopped petting Revas’ head, who lay next to her, whining. “What did you call me?”

“You are one of the People, no?”

Yes...” Her eyes narrowed. “I’m still not your friend, nor kin.”

“People think for some reason you are more than my fellow Warden,” Alistair elaborated into the tiny space of awkward silence, now made even more awkward by him. Perfect.

It elicited a mere shrug out of her. “How interesting, puppy.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Leliana giggled, stepping out of the shadowed background. “I’m Leliana. Nice to meet you, Nithius. Though I wished it were under better circumstances.”

“Hah, this is how I meet most people, for some reason.” While both shared the same freckled paleness, the elf’s orange-reddish hair was shorter and combed back over his head. “It is a pleasure, of course.” He turned back to Lenya. “Kin or not, I’m here to help.”

She sniffed and released a barrage of foreign (elvhen?) words upon him, which he elegantly replied to, in the same-sounding language. “You are the elf who lived with the People then, huh?” Lenya asked, using the common tongue again, thankfully.

“Yes, your kin, though not your clan. I am sure I would have noticed you otherwise.” Wait, was he flirting with her? Ugh. “From which clan did you come? It is unusual to see one of the People with the Wardens.”

“What is it to you?”

“Nothing...” He shrugged and the atmosphere within the chamber started to change as he called upon benevolent spirits to aid him in his work. His hands glowed brightly blue not a moment later and the minor scrapes, cuts and bruises upon her skin faded away. “Just curious, is all.” Nithius
clicked his tongue and pointed at her wounded side. “That was the easy part, but this one… is gonna hurt to heal. Mending flesh and all.”

“I know,” she huffed, rolling her eyes. Well, at least she was her good old self and thus not impressed by him. Or anyone, for that matter. “Neither my first injury, nor encounter with healing magic.” Right, she said once she had scars all over her body didn’t she? Maybe from hunting?

“What are you looking at?” Leliana’s voice startled him, but the coyness within was worse.

“N-nothing,” he blurted and quickly averted his eyes to a point in the room not being his scarcely dressed fellow Warden. Yeah that looked bad… but it was simple curiosity about – well, an explanation wouldn’t matter to the bard anyway, seeing how she had already made up this epic love story in her mind.

Being distracted, he only half-caught the elf’s apology. “…dwarves are less acquainted with magic than, well, other races, obviously.”

“Yeah, fascinating. Can we proceed?”

Nithius nodded, chuckling at Lenya’s impatience. “Of course.” He was a personable guy, genuinely nice and ready to help. All traits aiding him in his profession, nor particularly manners to be annoyed about. It wasn’t fair toward the elf either that his irritability had chosen to return and focus on him now, instead of Lenya. Okay, Leliana giggling next to him didn’t help either, nor the fact that his only other fellow Warden nearly died because she was too stubborn for her own good. For a day without battle and only sitting around in full armor, Alistair was exhausted. Though this had been part of the problem, of course. The not being allowed to help part.

Lenya barely flinched as Nithius healed the somewhat deeper wound, her face the usual mask of bravery. Unlike this morning, she was guarded with her emotions, careful not to show too much. Did this mean she was starting to trust him, even a little? That would be… nice, seeing how they were stuck with each other for a possible long time. The last Blight took what? Eighty or ninety years to defeat? Maker, this was triple a Warden’s life expectancy. How were they – two rookie Wardens – supposed to manage that? Duncan had warned him and the late king, but, but –

“Done. Good as new,” Nithius announced and his husky voice stopped him from spiraling into full panic, thankfully. His stomach in knots, Alistair took a deep breath. Stale air mixed with the distinctive smell of magic usage and coppery blood. They could do this. Just… one step at a time. They were here in Orzammar for a reason, after all.

“Ir tel’him,” Lenya said, slipping into her mother tongue and stood up in one fluid motion. “Maserrannas.” It was odd how much her pronunciation differed between elvhen and common tongue. The words seem heavier, more poignant somehow, with the way she rolled the ‘r’ over her tongue.

The elf smiled, bobbing his head. “Na’nehm.”

“I’ll see you later, puppy.” Passing him by, she patted his armored shoulders, then stretched herself with a yawn. Had she forgotten about her teared up clothes already? Rushing after her, he threw the reclaimed blanket over her head, burying her underneath the heavy, woolen fabric. Revas resurfaced first and freed his mistress in taking the blanket with him as he wiggled himself out of it. “Thanks. I’m tired, but not so tired that I won’t –“ she stopped, looking down at herself. “Oh, right.”

She did forgot… Maker, how? People used to joke about the Dalish dancing naked under the moonlight, mostly to create a disparaging image of them. Though what if there was a grain of truth
in these hushed whispers after all? Not the dancing, neither the moonlight—which seemed weirdly specific— but another concept of modesty, close-knitted as they lived normally? It would explain why Lenya wasn’t offended by him, well, finding her lightly dressed during her morning exercise a few days ago.

She rolled her eyes, yet picked up the blanket from the ground. “You shemlen have an odd understanding of modesty.”

Ah, so he had been correct with that. Damn, if only this would be valid for other, more vital things as well, but nooo. “If by ‘odd’, you mean not to run half-naked through Orzammar's streets, then yes.”

Nithius tugged at the corners of his shirt. “I can give you mine, for the time being.” *Wait, what?*

“Venavis!” She made a face toward him. “I’ll pass, thanks. You have aided me enough, already.”

He shrugged, letting go again. “*Ma nuvenin.*”

Swinging the blanket around herself, Lenya waved over her shoulder. “*Ghilas'enesal* and all that.” Revas trotted after her, as she left, silence in her wake. Come to think of it, there weren’t many people around in the proving hall anymore, which made sense, with the main event long over. How late was it? Evening? Or already night? It was so hard to tell without the visual aid of the sun and moon. Or two moons, once a year on Satinella, tha–

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“No problem. And to answer your question: No, I’m not hurt, as my stubborn fellow Warden didn’t even let me fight.” Alistair paused with a frown. “Why do you ask?”

Nithius smirked, thin lips curling up. “Because you stuck around all this time.”

“And?” What was his deal? “So did Leliana, for that matter.”


“Such kind offer, so why not?” She shrugged, smiling. “But you have to tell me everything about how you landed here in Orzammar.”

“Maybe not *everything*, my lady.” Had it been his imagination or did Nithius wince a little? No surprise, seeing how she was nosy as ever. It probably came with her profession, though. Minus the stabbing, hopefully. “I can show you around, however.” He offered her his arm and she hooked her own around it, as they left the hall and him behind, laughing.

Great, there were indeed two of them now, though unlike Lenya said, it did not include himself.

Back in the room assigned to him in Harrowmont’s mansion, sleep was still eluding Alistair. Approximately two hours had passed since his return from the proving hall, but his thoughts kept circling back to the events of the day. And what a day it had been, the stress during the tournament
surely have aged him a couple of years.

He sat up on his bed, which was too short for his height anyway. Wow, Sten must have a blast sleeping in these dwarven beds, far more than he already had. Not that he was complaining, nope. It was a bed after all and pure luxury after weeks of travel and nights spend with stones biting in his back on the cold, wet ground. Yeah, definitely an improvement here. And with this disaster of a proving done and favorable for Harrowmont at that, the elusive lord of the estate would finally welcome them in person tomorrow. Lenya wasn’t present for the brief discussion with Dulin Forender upon his return, so did she know about the meeting? Had she even left her room since then? Why would she anyway, not after the series of battles she had, the physical exertion, unlike him. No wonder nervous energy brimmed underneath his skin, adding to his already restless mind.

His room, covered in half-shadows illuminated by the shimmer of glowstones and lava vents, was spacious and yet offered not sufficient room for a spar either. A spar… Lenya promised to train with him, didn’t she? He didn’t imagine it in this fever dream that was this day, right? Obviously not tonight anymore. It would be better to let her rest and he should too. Maybe he should do some light exercise, or try to meditate to calm down a bit. The closeness to the Deep Roads here wasn’t helping to ease his mind either.

With a sigh, Alistair gave up all pretense of rest and got up. He gave his freshly polished armor on the stand a baleful stare. Normally, the maintenance routine of his armor, weapon and shield each day helped to keep his mind off things and to relax. Not tonight, though. Tonight, the griffon emblazoned on the armor seemed to taunt him, with all that he was not. Too big a boot to fill, by far. Six months were too little time to manage all that was expected of him now, of them. How should he guide his far more novice fellow Warden, when he lacked the experience and confidence for it himself? Not that Lenya needed guidance, mind you. She was perfectly capable without him and – that was part of the problem, wasn’t it? Her going her own way without his aid or input. He shoved her into the leading role himself, yes, in which she already did a better job than he ever could. But where was it leaving him, then? What was his presence worth to her, at all? Certainly less than what it meant to him – being the only other Grey Warden, being not alone in all… this.

Maker… this was why he yelled at her earlier, wasn’t it? Marching up and down the floor of his room, he drove an erratic hand through his hair, musing it. It wasn’t unjustified, him being angry at her, because she did needlessly endanger herself today. Still, once more he’d let his emotions get the better of him; all too fresh fears of getting left behind once more. With her gone, Loghain would have truly won and completed his treachery. No wonder he’d been so worried, and there was nothing wrong about it, right? Showing a bit of friendly concern? Okay, only that it hadn’t been so friendly, nor brotherly concern toward his fellow Warden today after all.

Maybe he should – yeah. With quick strides, Alistair left his room and found himself in the hallway before halting. What was he even doing? Lenya’s room was adjacent from his and the door… open and lit? Huh. Not asleep, then. Before stopping himself, he already stood in the door frame at the other side of the hall. He might as well enter then, right?

“Lenya… I –” His mind froze, along with all movements. Lenya was up and about alright, yes, but also even less dressed than after the proving. Her wiry, bare back turned to him, she combed her long, damp hair, threading sideways over her shoulder.

It is a hawk… he noted distantly, meaning the thick, black lines weaving all over her back, down to – oh. She wasn’t wearing any clothes. Why wasn’t she –

“Alistair…” In turning around toward him, she made it worse, since it provided him with full… frontal view. “Can’t sleep either, I see.”
Eyes widening, his mouth quivered, struggling to form any words. It was a matter of seconds at most till his hand finally found his face to cover his eyes, but it seemed more like an eternity. Oh. No. Abort.

“… sorry,” Alistair managed somehow and stumbled over his own feet in his haste to get away.

Back in the safety of his own room, he leaned his forehead against the closed door. The cool, smooth stone there did little to soothe his heated face. In fact, his whole body was ablaze and the pulse thrummed in his ears, as if he’d battled a horde of darkspawn. Which would have been preferable, because less mortifying, by far. How should he ever face her again, after tonight?

Alistair turned around, and looking upwards to the shadowed stone ceiling, squared his back against the door. He counted each in-and-exhale in order to calm his breathing and himself down, but gave up as he reached twenty. Despite all contrary attempts, the pressure kept building inside and… outside of him.

Shifting on his feet, Alistair looked down at himself and grimaced. Yeah. No. This could not be happening. Nope. After all, this was his fellow Warden and his reaction of seeing her, well, like this neither friendly and least of all brotherly.

“Maker… please strike me down!” he pleaded and let his head fall into his hands. But as soon he closed his eyes, her picture reappeared in front of him, as though etched into his mind now. Which in return sent more blood downwards, adding to his already unwanted hardness. A fitting punishment, somehow. Also probably a normal reaction to seeing a fully naked woman, but Lenya was his colleague and companion, not any random person, damn it! Alistair gave the bastard a baleful glare, as it twitched. This was… so wrong. She deserved better than this.

Exhaling shakily, he walked over to the bathtub at the other side of his room. Time to dunk his head – and especially other parts of him – in ice-cold water. Needless to say, he was not leaving this room again. As in ever. Sorry Ferelden. It was better this way.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

Emphasis is now less on the Proving itself, but on Alistair suffering through it, which is a fresh POV and far less boring than to recount the battles. The scene with Morrigan is new, as well as the first meeting with Nithius got revamped. Through shifts in characterization and dynamic, Lenya is far less impressed by him than in my old version. The only element I kept is Alistair running into naked Lenya, but instead being peeved about it, she can't give a fuck xD The scene got also extended (in its awkwardness) because why not.

Thanks so much for reading, if you did. Sorry for being horrible in keeping this thing up to date, though. I'll try. Lemme know what you liked and why in the comments though?
Stay, Part I

Chapter Summary

Lenya gets to see new places, meets new people, and then kills them. Like the Carta, for example. Also, people are assholes, but not all of them. Maybe. Just maybe.

Chapter Notes

This will be a two part chapter. I split it for better readability, because it is looooong. Enjoy?

“Curious how His lordship,” Morrigan rolled the title over her tongue like an insult and scoffed. “… has found yet another task for us to fulfill so soon after your victory at the tournament, isn’t it?”

She wasn’t wrong, either. The meeting with the durgen'len lord this morning was a shitty mixture of long-winded explanations and empty phrases of gratitude for risking her ass in the proving. And an interlude to request the next big thing to fix in this oversized city of rocks, of course. Oh, can’t forget the lava either, nor the stuffy air having the distinct tang of a halla barfing up their last meal. Though this would require actual grass and greenery and last time Lenya checked… nope, still only rocks here. And insomnia and/or darkspawn nightmares on top of it. What a lovely place it was, ugh.

“Weren’t you the one who said...” Alistair pitched his tone higher, to imitate and mock Morrigan’s words. “… Do not miss the chance to indebt a dwarven lord to the Wardens?”

“Oh, he still can speak.” She regarded him coolly. “Pity, that.”

“You have been rather quiet today, Alistair,” the chantry shem said and adjusted the bow slung over her shoulder. Practicality was the reason Lenya let her tag along, since according to the flat-eared elf the criminal organization called the Carta loved to spike their hideout with traps of all sorts. She was good in disarming them herself, and so was the shemlen, at that. More capable hands meant less danger in setting off said traps. Simple math, really. Plus, her archery offered the option of long-range attacks, which they, Morrigan aside, lacked. She was still grating, of course.

Good,” Shale agreed. “Its constant wailing is unwanted, anyway.” As for the golem, well it was a given to take the creature out for some not-so measured bloodsport. The objective was to kill Carta leader Jarvia in a place called Dust Town. She would surely not lie down and welcome her impending death without attempting to inflict the same upon them. Nor would her underlings, for that matter. Thus the immortal, murderous rock was a good choice for this task, even if its approach to battle was always very... messy.

“I’m not in the mood to talk, okay?”

“And here I thought you would be happy to tag along, puppy.” Lenya let herself fall back to the
rear of the group, where he hid himself. Alistair immediately turned his head into the opposite
direction, as if taking a keen interest in the merchant's stalls at the side of the street. “I even wear
my full armor and weapons today, see?” Of course he didn’t, as this would require looking at her.
Creators, and that after he’d yelled at her for not including him or requiring his help yesterday.
What a weird human.

“Way more than last night, then,” he muttered under his breath, not destined for her ears. Well, too
bad he forgot about her extended hearing. Ah, so that was the issue. It explained why she was met
with avoidance instead of the usual… eagerness this morning. Not that his silence wasn’t welcome,
as much as he talked normally. It was just… odd, for him.

“Have you never seen a naked woman before, Alistair?”

His head snapped around to stare at her, eyes wide. “What?”

Huh, guess not, then. “It is nothing special. A body is just a body and you shouldn’t worry too
much about it.” His cheeks darkened further, and every bit of his brown skin visible gained a
reddish tint. Shit, he wouldn’t last a week in a Dalish clan. Mainly because he was a shemlen, but
also what was it about humans and their shame regarding nakedness? Why was it a thing?
“Besides, it was you coming into my room, wasn’t it?”

“I… –“ He made a pained face and lowered his voice. “Can we please not discuss that? Especially
now?”

“Oh?” The chantry shem perked up, slowed her steps to be at a level with them. “What happened?”
she asked in a tone belying she hasn’t heard everything already. Was she jealous? They were close,
after all.

Morrigan only scoffed. “I doubt anyone could endure this fool long enough to let it come to that.”

Alistair whimpered in reply, growing even more reddish. Wow, if this continued his head would
explode soon. Would be nice for the peace and quiet gained then, though less so in losing her only
fellow Warden. Nah, the disadvantage of being down one capable fighter and the loss of his
somewhat limited knowledge about their shitty, decimated Order would be bigger than the benefits
overall.

“Can we simply… focus on the task at hand? That would be great, thanks.” Creators, it was just a
simple question, but it was already too much for him. She rolled her eyes at his back as he sped up
his steps to get away. Humans.

Dust Town was, well, the name of it encapsulated its look of it. Truth be told, the reek of piss,
unwashed bodies, and yes, dust whirling in the air did little to do its real misery justice. Instead of
towering houses forged out of the mountain’s stone the people here had haphazardly shacks of
splintered rocks with torn fabric fastened at the entrance, serving as a door.

“This is… still Orzammar, right?”

The chantry shem glanced around, blinking in confusion like her fellow Warden did. Morrigan held
her nose with a particular disgusted expression etched into her face. Well, hard to blame her for
this, really.

A man with scars all over his face came up way too close to her own and grinned. He was missing
several teeth and it took Lenya everything to not vomit, given his vile stench. “Look what the nugs
brought in. Are ya lost, sweetheart? Took the wrong turn, somewhere?”

Backing away, she glared down at the durgen’len, reaching up only to her chin. “Unfortunately, no.” Twisting her gloved hand, she balled it to a fist and brought it up between them. “Keep calling me that and you will lose the rest of your teeth!”

“Hah. Got guts, Warden. Like that,” he said, chortling. “Still need m’teeth. Gotta sell them.”

“Fascinating.” Holding her breath, she pushed past him. Alas, she would die of suffocation if she were to continually stop breathing as the place would actually require to do. It would be preferable to being here, though.

“Still, gotta be careful here,” the dwarf warned, halting her steps. “Fellas get gutted n’ robbed…” He swayed his hips. “…while wenches like you –”

Whirling around, Lenya punched him square in the face. Keeping a promise was important, after all. “I go where I want.”

Morrigan stepped over him on the ground. “This entails this place, alas. Let us be quick.”

“Agrreed…” Alistair glared at the man in passing. "We shouldn't linger."

“This… this is –“ Yeah, for once she had to concur with the chantry shem, down to her lack of words. Why did people live in such squalor? How could this be permitted by the durgen’len? She wouldn’t give a shit about it, hadn’t she seen the vast disparity between the diamond district and… this place here before.

“Spare a coin for the needy?”

A young dwarven woman sat in the dirt, sheets of rusty metal were welded into the wall of the large building behind her. Maybe it was offering her some sort of poorly constructed shelter. Or maybe it had been there for a long time already, long before her. Hard to tell with this place. “If you can tell us where to find Jarvia, we might.”

“It is not for me,” she insisted, ignoring her offer. “It is for my child.” Yeah, that was nice and all, but if they would start giving everyone money in need, especially with the Blight going on, they would run out of resources sooner than one could blink. “Please. He is sick. He hasn’t any clean clothes to wear, or anything to eat today. Neither have I.” The heartfelt plea seemed to be suffice to loosen Alistair’s pockets, however.

“Don’t look at me like that, Lenya,” he huffed when noticing her gaze. “It is my own coin. I’m allowed to do with it as I please, right?”

Wow, from blushing awkwardness to passive aggression at one fell swoop. So not an improvement. Well, two could play that game. “Yes, puppy,” she replied, tone all fake sweet.

“Besides, we got twenty gold from Baizyl lately. It is not as if we can’t spare a coin or two.”

“Ah yes, because mentioning how much money we have on us is the smart thing to do here in this place,” Morrigan chipped in, had forgone passive aggression for unaltered sarcasm. “Tis not as if someone would attempt to rob us now.”

“If the midgets try, I can at least crush them,” Shale chuckled, all too eager. “And then the Painted Warden Elf can take their money to buy me more pretty crystals. I want to sparkle from ear to ear, so to speak.” Well, it had been a worthy investment then, these new, bigger crystals set into Shale’s
skin. No idea how it worked and why a merchant here was selling these, but if it served to keep the
golem in a good mood, why not? And the dark green gleam of its crystal was a nice change to the
prior violet. Green was a too fucking rare color underground here anyway. Even if she would want
to give the girl money, the crystals had been where her remaining money she had on herself went.

Lenya wasn’t stupid to run around with so much coins on herself, thank you very much. She left it
back in Harrowmont’s estate with Revas and Sten and it was doubtful anyone would attempt to rob
them. It would be safe there, until she had actually time to stock up much needed supplies. Given
the durgens’ lord’s tendency to send her all across Orzammar to murder people in his way
without pause, that wouldn’t be any time soon, though. These people hinder his candidacy for the
throne in the eyes of the assembly, blah blah blah. Why he hadn’t murdered them on his own
already, instead of sitting on that fat arse in his mansion all day? That would require putting in
actual work, though. Can’t have that. Ugh, durgens politics was a load of halla crap, and then
some.

“It is not much, but all we have now,” Alistair said, pressing a silver coin into the girl’s dirtied
hands.

“Thank you, kind ser… Warden,” she added after glancing at the griffon on his chestplate. “My
name is Zerlinda. I wasn’t always like this.” Oh Creators, did she understand this act of charity as a
prompt to tell her life story? Fantastic. “I was born in the mining caste. We weren’t wealthy, but I
never went hungry before.”

“t appears you are a long way from home, then,” Morrigan said, derision in her voice. She shifted
on her feet, obviously uncomfortable and eager to be elsewhere.

“Yes, it is my own fault,” the young woman agreed, surprisingly. Her voice choked as she
continued. “And ancestors curse me, there is nothing I can do to set it right.” Mythal’s tits, she
displayed the full play of evoking sympathy in them. It was obvious pandering, because no matter
how genuine her problems were, they were none of their business. They were here for Jarvia,
nothing else.

Of course the chantry shem took the bite. “What is wrong?”

“My son’s father is casteless,” Zerlinda explained and tears shot into her eyes. “My parents have
disowned me unless I – but no, I can’t even bear to think of it!”

She was sobbing now, the act either too real to be one, or she really was practiced in it. Given her
distress, it appeared more of the former and not a money grabbing scheme. Huh. The shem stepped
closer and lay a gloved hand upon her shoulder. “What does your parents want you to do?”

“THEY want me to abandon my casteless boy in the Deep Roads,” she sniffled, struggled to bring
the words out. ”And pretend I never bore him.”

“That is horrible,” Alistair and Leliana almost gasped out in unison. Figures.

“This makes no fucking sense,” Lenya blurted, unable to stop herself. “He is your son and their
grandson, why would they treat him like that? And you, their daughter, for that matter?” She had
only a minor grasp of how things worked in Orzammar, if at all, and that flat ear had warned her of
this place. But as far she was concerned, it was already a giant dump of halla-shit. Why did people,
families treat – … no, what purpose served it to get worked up about it? It wasn’t her culture, or
business.

Zerlinda whimpered and hastily wiped at her tears, which only smeared the dust and dirt further
across her pale, gaunt cheeks. “I guess you wouldn’t know, being elven. No offense, Warden.”

“None taken.” For once, that was.

“You see in Orzammar lineage is traced through the same-sex parent. Had my baby been a girl, she would have been a miner, like me. But since he is a boy, he is forever tainted by his father’s seed.”

Yikes, that was… one way to put it, certainly. And what was it about castes she kept mentioning? It was an element of Orzammar that was as unknown to her as it was nonsensical. “This makes no fucking sense,” Lenya repeated, firmer now. Yep, there it was. The hot wave of anger rising in her guts. Too late to back down, then.

“It may not to you, but such is our life, our rules. In choosing my son, I have become casteless and need to beg here on the streets. What other choice do I have?”

Leave? But Orzammar was home to the woman, all she’d ever known. Like it had been for Lenya with her clan, yet this dwarf had a choice, unlike herself. “Not killing your son in abandoning him would be a good start.”

“I agree,” Alistair spoke up, his tone soft and understanding. “Is there a way we can talk to your family?”

“We are wasting time! Tis not our problem!” No it wasn’t, but now it would be heartless to back out of it. And inconvenience aside, what was one more task in the bulk of it, especially if it helped Zerlinda and her child? Fuck, Alistair’s starry-eyed idealism had started to rub off on her already, huh? Well one thing was sure she would never go around and save cats from trees. These furry little demons, ugh.

“If not, do you know someone on the surface, Zerlinda?” The chantry shem asked, ignoring Morrigan’s complain.

“No, I don’t know anyone topside, but my father is usually at Tapsters in the evening. His name is Ordel, though I warn you… he is a stiff-necked man. I don’t think he will listen to you.”

Lenya shrugged. “Well, wouldn’t be the first durgen’len I punched today.”

“Maybe we should try talking first, Lenya. Never wrong to do so, right?” Yeah puppy should know about talking, as he was an expert in it, for sure. So much that he hardly ever stopped.

“I… don’t know how to thank you, Wardens. No one has shown me such kindness in days.”

“You could start by telling us how and where in Dust Town to find the Carta leader.”

“Right, Warden,” Zerlinda exhaled, much calmer now. “I don’t know much, but sitting here for days I have seen some gruff-looking brands, err, casteless go in and out of that tall building behind me. I am quite certain they are part of the Carta.”

“Need a key to get in there, sweetheart. Can sell you more info for coin.” Ugh, that piece of shit made his appearance again behind her.

“Yeah, that is not going to happen, asshole.” Lenya whirled round to him. “I can punch it out of you, however.”

“You are a nasty littl’ elf, bah.” Wiping his bloody mouth, he waved her off. “Forget it then. Going against Jarvia is suicide anyway. Your funeral, bitch.”
This time it wasn’t her fist which connected with that ugly face of his, but Alistair’s, sending him back onto the ground. “He really doesn’t know when to stop, huh?” Noticing her surprised stare lingering on him, he added, “What? I know you can handle yourself, Lenya, but no one is talking about my fellow Warden this way.”

“I… appreciate it, Alistair,” she said, smiling at him.

He flushed harder than even before and coughed into his armored hand. “So, um, a key needed means a fitting door which we have to find. We, err, better get on to it.”

“Figured that out on your own, haven’t you?” Morrigan sneered into his direction. “How very clever.”

“But we still haven’t the needed key, even if we find the door to their hideout.” Creators, that chantry shem was back with grating on her nerves. It had been a matter of time until that happened again, anyhow.

Lenya pushed past the bard to search for a suspicious indention or pattern in the wall. “Who needs keys when we have Shale?”

“How cute how It believes I heed Its every command.”

She looked over her shoulder to the creature. “I mean we also could run around like headless chicken for hours still in search of a key and pass up on the chance of crushing many, many heads. Oooor get to the crushing part immediately, Shale.”

“We already stood around too much in this… rotten place, true.” The golem sighed, weary. “Bah, fine I will help It, then.”

“Good. Let’s not waste any more time.”

Finding and killing Jarvia had been, unsurprisingly, a bloody affair. In both senses of the word. Mainly because of the golem in their group, but not only due to it. As expected the Carta hideout was spiked with traps of all sort, but Lenya and Leliana made short work out of them, before his fellow Warden proceeded to make short work out of Jarvia herself.

Maker, this reminded him never to antagonize Lenya enough to warrant the use of blades. Outside of sparring, that was. The carta leader thought of herself ruthless and untouchable, yet each quick step and cut provided by Lenya proved her wrong. She had been the ruthless one, in truth. No, not ruthless, that was too harsh a word. More like… effective. Precise.

Lenya fought like she moved; quick and not exactly elegant, but definitely deathly in fierceness and accuracy. A force to behold, indeed. It made it easier for him too, to focus on battle at her side, because her ability to take care of herself were more than empty words, by far. Sure, there was room for improvements in her stance and movements, but that was why they would start to spar, right? To learn from each other. That would require her returning to the estate, however.

After that infamous encounter with her last night, Alistair should be grateful for some distance between them, but it had been hours now since they parted ways after leaving Dust Town. Lenya wanted to find Zerlinda’s father in Tapsters, while he opted for a bath and rest in his room. Washed and dressed down to civil clothing instead of his armor, Alistair left his room to make his way into the main hall. Something was thrown into his direction, and not a moment later Revas bounded past him and quickly back, once he’d retrieved the object.
“We don’t have time for this now,” Sten said and the mabari whined in reply. Wait, was the Qunari playing fetch with the dog? This he had to see. Revas sat down in front of his much larger companion to peer up to him, wagging his stubby tail. “No, absolutely not,” Sten replied, glaring down at the mabari, who whined again. “I have no time for this nonsense.”

This time, Revas gave him his best heart-rendering, most plaintive whine. Which he did whenever food was in reach and he was oh-so dying of hunger. Alistair snorted. Dirty cheating mutt, using all his tricks to get what he want. “… Fine.” The Qunari sighed in resignation. “Bring me the stick. But this is the last time, I swear it.” Revas rushed toward Sten with a happy bark and the stick in his mouth to spit it out at his feet.

“Am I… interrupting something here?”

Sten quickly hid the stick behind his massive back and glared at him. “I was simply helping it train.”

“Sure you was.” He chuckled. “Did Lenya return, by any chance?”

“Do I look like I care if she did?”

“No, but like someone who enjoys playing fetch with her mabari.” Revas bestowed these words with an agreeing bark and a wag of his tail.

“She is a Grey Warden, is she not? She should know her duty. If not, you should teach your woman better.”

What? All amusement about the prior scene with Revas dissipated. “She is not a dog or animal to train, but a person!” he bristled, squaring his shoulders in front of Sten. “And you would do well to remember that!”

“Interesting. So you have a backbone, after all,” the Qunari huffed, regarding him with cool disapproval. “Pity you only show it when vying for the elf’s approval. Not when it matters.”

Argh, the nerves of that – No. Better to leave now before he was doing or saying something very stupid and possibly suicidal in return. Pushing past Sten, Alistair rushed for the exit.

Leaving had been the right decision, as the way back to the tavern in the commons gave him enough time to cool off. Still, despite Sten being an able fighter, he was as impossible to deal with like… Morrigan. Ugh, why was their group so –

“I wouldn’t go in there, human,” said a gruff voice beside him, interrupting his thoughts. Alistair stopped and looked to his right side, then down. It was the same scruffy, red-haired dwarf that had been thrown out of the tavern days ago. Was that the reason he now lingered in front of Tapsters?

“Why?” Yeah right, nothing that could go wrong in engaging with that dwarf. Well done.

“’cause it is a sodding place full of bloody nug-humpers.” He chortled and took another pull out of his flask. Maker’s breath, he reeked like a whole brewery. “’n that elven lady caused a ruckus with one of the patrons. But she isn’t thrown out, because they are sodding cowards fearing the Warden, bah.” No doubt he was talking about Lenya here. He squeezed the bridge of his nose with two
fingers and sighed. What did she do this time?

The dwarf approached further and peering up to him, he squinted his dark eyes. His braided but filthy beard twitched as he grimaced. "Wait, I know ya, boy. Ya are the other one of those fancy Grey Wardens walking around here. Coming from the surface, great crisis to the world and all that. Working for Harrowmont, I heard."

“And?”

“Nothing.” He shrugged and let out a loud belch. Charming. “Just that. Ya are of no worth to me if ya don’t go into the Deep Roads to find Branka.”

He should leave the dwarf be and go to seek out Lenya before she’d turn the tavern into ash with a misplaced fire bomb or had punched every dwarf in reach. Wearing her armor still, this would not exactly help the reputation of Grey Wardens here in Orzammar. Especially since there were only two in all Ferelden at the moment. Alas, his mouth was quicker than his reasonable intent. “Who is that?”

“Oh no one, Warden,” he scoffed. “’s just the only living dwarven paragon and my wife.”

“Y-your wife?” This guy was… married? How and why would someone in their right mind –

“’f course.” He nodded and slapped his potbelly with a chortle. “Such a fine dwarven specimen like myself does not–“

“You know what? On second thoughts, I don’t need details, thanks.” Refusing to hear another word, Alistair ran up the stairs toward Tapster’s entrance.

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The heat and noise inside of the tavern hit him in the face like a kite-shield. Tapsters, as usual, was bustling and bursting with more people than the building of its size should actually contain. This didn’t stop people of all kinds to seek out a place inside of it anyway. Laughter and song droned in his ears and in one corner a couple was… err, very eager to socialize with each other. How… nice. Alistair quickly turned his head into the other direction as he passed them by, pushing forward through the masses around him. The floor was sticky where ale had been spilt… at least he hoped it to be ale and nothing else. Considering the smell of alcohol, food and people mingling – many of them skipping bath day in favor of drinking – it wasn’t ensured to be the case, though. Great.

Despite the tavern being overcrowded, there was one table in the furthest corner that remained empty. Each of the patrons who approached the corner tended to give it a wide berth right after. If this isn’t Lenya, he thought while steering into that direction, I’ll eat my Tapster-sticky boot.

Of course it was her. With empty plates of food, one medium-sized wine bottle; also empty, in front of her, she glowered at the other bottle in her hands, not acknowledging him.

“Hey…”

“Hmpf,” she grunted and took another sip out of the half-full bottle, containing some yellowed-golden liquid.

“Mind if I…” Before he could sit down, she pushed her beverage toward him.
“Drink, don’t talk, puppy.” Her words were slurred, indicating that she had indeed emptied that bottle on the table.

Alistair took it and gave it a whiff. It was not the expected wine, but tart and smelling of apples. Cider, then. Ah. “What brought this on, Lenya?”

“People are assholes.”

So she was a miserable drunk then, huh? People told him he became giddy and even more talkative when drinking too much. Maker knows no one wanted that. Alas, he had never been good in holding his liquor, so it took not much for him to be too deep into his cups. Maybe a bit more since becoming a Warden, which entailed heightened tolerance in many aspects of life as one of its many side-effects. Not by much, though. So for him, it was better to avoid it altogether.

“I once foolishly accepted a drinking challenge issued by Samuel, shortly after my Joining,” he mused, half to Lenya, half to himself. “You see, he was a big and burly guy, but similar in size like me, so I thought I could defeat him. The next day I spent suspended over a bucket, feeling like a horde of darkspawn had descended upon me, proved me wrong.”

“How nice,” she grumped, reclaiming the bottle to drink.


“I’ve found Zzzerl – her father.” Unlike the rest of her, her face wasn’t bloodied anymore, but flushed by the alcohol and heat here. The state of her armor explained people’s reluctance to approach these seats, though. “Was an asshole. Punched him.”

Ah. Of course. “Why?”

“Asshooole,” she drawled, staring blearily at him. Her eyes were slightly reddened. Was it due to the alcohol or had she been crying? “He called his daughter names and cursed his grandson. His own family. Who does that?” Oh. She cared. It wasn’t news to him, exactly. She’d had shown to do so before, if very selectively and not without bluster or layers of hostility. But underneath it all, Lenya... cared. “Why are people so shitty?”

The pause between them stretched further. Did she want a reply or – “You are nice, though.” … not. “Why are you so nice, puppy?”

That was definitely a question posed to him. Alas, he lacked the words to answer. “I… am?” he asked instead and grimaced right after. Very eloquent.

“Yeeees.” Her nod was sluggish. “Not only to me, but everyone. Well, except for Morrigan. But that is okay, you both have that thing going on, where you insult each other.”

“Right.” How was he supposed to react to this? “Thanks… I guess?”

“Why, though?” Her gaze bore into his, demanding a reply. He couldn't look away. Why couldn't he – “Isn’t it exhausting, all that… caring?”

Alistair blinked a few times, breaking their eye contact in this manner. “It would be much sadder and lonelier not to at least try, I think.” He drove a hand through his still damp hair. “Everyone deserves that chance, right?”

“cept for assholes,” she stated, sipping from her drink again.
“Hmm, and who qualifies as such, dear lady?”

The title used in jest brought out her usual scowl. “Shemlen, mostly.” Oh, here we go. “’nd flat ears. ‘nd today I learned durgen’len are too.”

“Maybe that’s because people aren’t so easy to categorize?” He shrugged. “They are more than one or the other thing only.” She should know that best herself.

“Yeeees, but mostly… assholes.”

Maker’s breath, it was like running in a loop with her, sometimes. Lenya’s mouth twitched up and she snorted. Which turned into a giggle and then full on laughter. Okay, now she was having him on. “Such a good word. Rolls off the tongue and ‘s universally usable.”

“I certainly hope you won’t—”

“Hey there, other Warden,” Corra appeared at their table and waved at him with a bright smile in her face. “Was wondering when you would show up.” She stemmed the tablet into her hips and tilted her head. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thank you, I’m good.” He clicked his tongue. “Can we pay, please?”

“I sure hope you can, as your fellow Warden ate and drank a lot.” Corra whirled round and yelled words lost to the din of the tavern toward the bartender. She shrugged as a by way apology. “Sorry it is busy tonight.”

“’s nuff?” Lenya said and threw a vast array of coins on the table...which also were partly crusted with dried blood. Maker.

The dwarf’s eyes grew wider. “Stone, where did you get these from?”

“Looted from the carta thugs I killed today, obviously,” she replied as if it were the most conspicuous thing.

“Of… course.” Corra paused. “Tell you what, Wardens: You keep your literal bloody money and I write this off as on the house. Ancestor’s know it is busy enough tonight that it won’t be noticed. Plus… I somehow doubt the Carta will bother us for a while, thanks to you.”

Lenya recollected all coins from the table with a shrug. “Hmm, fine.”

“I cannot linger any longer, but I wish you well, Wardens. Perhaps less murder?”

“No promises.” Shifting her gaze to him after Corra left them, she added an indignant “What?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“… since ‘s apparently our job to fix every little shit broken here in Orzammar.” Lenya scowled, her voice whiny. “I hate this place. All this rock and stone overhead, no trees or sky. I hate it! I want to go hooooome.”

“That is what I can help with,” he offered, smiling. “Accompany you back to the estate, if you like.”

Her eyes flicked to the cider in the bottle. “That is not home.”

Ah. Of course. That explained her choice of beverage. “I know. I can still help you avoiding to
“Bah.” His attempt at humor fell flat, like so often. “I can walk on my own, human!” Bristling, Lenya rushed to get up, stumbled a bit and plopped back down on the bench. “Mkay, maybe not. ...Help?”

Figured that it would take her to be drunk to ask for his help. Overall she was holding her liquor a lot better than he was able to, given the already emptied bottle on the table, and all. “Certainly.” Alistair stood up and in front of her, effectively hindering her with his body from toppling over.

Instead of taking his offered hand, she squinted up at him and focused on another detail. “You are so tall.”

“I am, yes. Imagine if I weren’t,” he joked.” Our enemies would try and hit you instead.”

“Pshaa, good luck with that. I’m quick.” She paused to deliberate. “Just… not now.”

“Aww. That is what I’m here for, after all.” Alistair offered her his arm once more and this time she took it. Wobbling on her feet, Lenya stood up, revealing one important missing detail about her gear. “Wait, where is your weapon belt?”

She looked down at herself. “Huh?” Well, there was not much aid to be expected of her, in this state. “Oh, that. ‘S on the bench. It poked me. Stupid thing.”

“Right. Best not to leave it behind, then.” Not letting go of her, he reclaimed the heavy item from her seat. “I hold on to it for the time being.”

She snorted. “Like you did in Ostagar?” Pitching her voice higher, she imitated her own words, from back then. “Thieving shemlen!”

Oh, that. Maker, this seemed like years ago, when in truth… it had been only a couple of weeks. So much had happened, since that day. Damn. “Remember, I’m simply safekeeping and not stealing it,” Alistair said, playing along and steered her gently toward the exit. “Come on now, let’s get back.”
Stay, Part II

Chapter Summary

Alistair continues to confuse romantic feelings for having eaten something wrong and omits to tell Lenya some pretty vital information about the Wardens. Big mistake.

Chapter Notes

Short chapters aren’t my strong suit. So here have part two of one prior long one. Split up for better readability. Read part one before this one, or it will make little to no sense to you ;) Enjoy, and let me know what you think, maybe?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Huh, how quickly things changed. Only yesterday it was where, well, that happened, in her room. He never wanted to set a foot into it again, ever, or for that matter, facing her. Yeah, considering Alistair had led her into her room, hooked under his arm for support, this had turned out quite differently than planned. Evading Revas’ slobbering display of affection, he laid her weapon belt down on top of the dresser at the side, while Lenya plopped down on the bed. Barking, the Mabari took a sharp turn, ignoring him in favor of his mistress after all.

“You want to sleep in your bloodied armor?”

“Why…?” She groaned into the mattress as she sprawled out on the bed. Yep, he should really leave her alone. This was – Blowing a wayward strand of her hair out of her face, Lenya grinned up to him, halting his thought. “So eager to see me naked again?”

“Errrr,” His mouth hang open, uttering this embarrassing sound, while his mind blanked. Once more, heat settled in his cheeks and… elsewhere. “Maker, no!” he finally managed, somehow. Clearing his throat ended in a minor coughing fit, though it gave him time to regain his bearings, at least. “I, umm, prefer you very much dressed. I simply thought it would be uncomfortable for you, that’s all.”

“Creators, you are too easy to tease, puppy.” Her laugh was bright, easy. “Just like Tamlen.” As soon the name was verbalized, all traces of humor vanished from her face and demeanor.

“Tamlen?” Ugh. He should leave her be, call it a night. It was none of his business. “Who is that?” Great how he constantly failed to heed his advice today. Nothing new by far. Still annoying.

He might as well could have punched her into her guts, given her pained expression at that. “Doesn’t matter. He is gone now, like everyone I ever cared about.” A clansmate, then? Revas protested the notion expressed with a loud whine and lay his large head onto her mattress. Lenya petted him half-heartedly and curled into herself.

I know the feeling, he thought. “I’m sorry,” he said, instead. “But you can see him again, once this is over, right? Given we are still alive, that is.”
Lenya only shook her head… and then trembled with the force of barely suppressed sobs. Oh. Oh. Shit. Alistair wasn’t the type to curse and cuss, but here? Here it fitted. What an absolute buffoon he was, blundering into her privacy and ripping open not-so old wounds in his desire to – yeah, what exactly? Know more about her? Form a companionship with her after the rocky start they had? It was all about that, certainly, this curiosity. Still, it didn’t give him the right to – “I’m sorry,” Alistair repeated, approaching her bedside. “I shouldn’t have pried and left it – and you – alone. Now I am the asshole, huh?” Self-deprecating humor was his life-long companion and first weapon of choice to diffuse situations like this. Right now? It was insufficient and downright macabre.

“A bit, perhaps,” she admitted, choking through the words. “Couldn’t have known that, though.”

“Yeah...maybe. Still I have a talent for putting the foot in my mouth.” Alistair sighed out loud. “It is late and I should let you sleep.” Which, regarding his beyond clumsy reminder would be surely not a quiet night for his fellow Warden. Independent of any darkspawn nightmares occurring or not. Well done, yourself.

“No,” Lenya said, sniffling. “Stay.”

For the shortest moment, he forgot how breathing worked. When he remembered again, his exhale was trembling and erratic, like his thoughts. It wasn’t fair. A single word shouldn’t have such power over him, or being able to root him on the spot. But was it truly the word, or the person uttering it? The warmth spreading in his stomach gave him the according reply to that. Had he even eaten properly today? Maybe that was why his stomach acted up.

“’til I’m asleep?” His stomach did another flip. Yeah, the lack of food wasn’t the reason here. “With you screaming in my head, ‘s no place for others.”

“Okay…” So she was having trouble sleeping, like him. No surprise here, especially since she told him that, prior to the Proving. It simply had slipped his mind with everything that had happened since then.

Lenya sat up, scratched her head and shifted. “Ugh, need to dress down. ’S itchy ‘nd poky.”

His gaze flicked to the door. “I… should –” ...

Instead he whirled away, fixing the wall opposite of her.

“Really, puppy?” She snorted and cursed under her breath as she stumbled a bit. “’m not naked, dummy. Just…” Loud clutter and other colorful words – half in common, half in elvhen tongue – followed. “...getting rid of this… shit, fuck… thing.”

One way to describe armor, certainly. It shouldn’t amuse him as much as it did. Then again, he shouldn’t be here in the first place and he was. “I’m only trying to avoid such a situation like yesterday from repeating. For which I’m also sorry, by the way. I should have knocked, at the very least.” It was good to voice that and get it out of the way, even if it wasn’t to Lenya’s face and she was kind of… drunk. Yeah, not exactly the best course of action, wasn’t it?


There was a stark difference between ‘a bit of skin’ and full on… nudity, but somehow he had the feeling that arguing this point with her drunk self would go over even more badly than when she was sober. “I take it is different for your people?” he settled for instead.
“My clan…” There was a somber pause before she continued, “...we care for each other, share every resource. But ‘s lotta people, on little space, ‘nd we can’t afford useless attitudes ‘bout modesty. Pointless, that.”

The bed creaked slightly when she plopped down onto the mattress with a grunt. “Y’ can look now without hurting your sensitive eeeeyesss. Boohoo.” She paused for a moment. “By the way, are there elves in your family?”

“What?” Alistair whirled around. “No!” Oh, that sounded too harsh, but she couldn’t spring that on him. “I mean.. why?”

“Nothin’. Just a question.” She yawned as she stretched her limbs and covered herself with a blanket. “Maybe ‘s a trick of light after all. Dunno.”

Huh… what was that supposed to mean? “Come, siiit puppy.” Before he was able to react, the other, or rather, real puppy gave chase to the other side of the bed and hopped on it. Once Revas had settled down next to Lenya’s back, he locked eyes with him and huffed smugly.

“I think your dog was quicker.”

“Hmpf, still enough space to sit for ‘nother puppy. ‘s large, that bed.” Her pointed ear visible twitched a little. “Nah, leave that stupid sssstool.”

Alistair put the stool down again in the corner where it belonged. “How did you –“

She pointed at her ear. “Better hearing. ‘nd you being very noisy.”

“Hmm.” Left no other choice, he wedged a corner of the bed free from the mabari’s possession to sit down. Revas took it as invitation to lie his head into Alistair’s lap in hope for pets. Doubtful he would ever learn he was too big for being a lap dog, so Alistair resigned to his fate and stroked his tawny fur. It gave him something to do while he waited for her to fall asleep. And then? Then what? Sneak out of her room like a thief in the night? How would that look to others? Least of all staying in her room overnight? Maker, he really hadn’t thought this through. Well, he couldn't leave her on her own either, not after she’d asked him.

“Ma serannas, Alistair,” Lenya mumbled more than spoke and curled into herself. This time not due grief or homesickness, but getting in a comfortable sleeping position. Almost like a… cat. Ironic, really. “For sssstaying.”

He smiled at her back. “Yeah, no problem.” The comforting buzz of her taint and the dog’s warm weight on his lap quickly lulled him into relaxation too. His eyes drooped before he jerked awake again, heart racing. Falling asleep here would be bad indeed and he shouldn’t, but her company was really... nice. And what was the harm of lingering a few more minutes? Just to ensure he would keep his promise to her and she was the one sleeping soundly. Not him.

The persistent knocking at the door startled Alistair awake. “Wha –“ Blinking to clear his sight, he wiped the spit at the corners of his mouth away. Lenya commented on the noise with a groan and pulled the blanket over her head. Wait... Lenya? So he had fallen asleep in her room after all. Great. Revas jumped down from the bed, only to sit down next to the door with a low whine.

“Right.” Standing up, Alistair drove a hand through his hair and massaged the crick in his neck with a hiss. Reaching the other side of the room, he opened the door.
“You are not Lenya,” the elf – Nithius – said, gaping at him. “I… what are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same,” Alistair gruffed, blocking the entrance for him. “Knocking in the middle of the night –“

“Night?” He chuckled. “No, Warden. It is morning already. Did you miss the morning bell?”

“Oh...” was all his sleep-fogged mind was capable to reply. He had slept through the night? Without nightmares? Huh. The exhaustion of the day with many battles certainly aided here, but still very unusual.

“I came to let you know that my lord expects you to gather in his study in about an hour. “ Nithius made himself taller than he was in the attempt to look past Alistair. Given their difference in height and frame, he had little success with it, as Alistair didn’t step away. Why should he, anyway? Lenya wasn’t up yet and thus the elf had no right to enter and disturb her. “And I wanted to talk with your fellow Warden about something. In private.”

“Oh?” he repeated, now posed as a question and a bit of a challenge. Looking down at him, their eyes locked for a moment. He gave him a halfhearted shrug. “Too bad. I fear this has to wait.”

“Hi Nithius.” Lenya’s voice rang behind himself and then Alistair was pushed aside, out of the door frame. It was more the surprise about it than really its force which sent him stumbling. “Bye, Nithius,” she added and shut the door in his face. Not stopping to explain why or even sparing him a glance, Lenya whirled round on the balls of her feet and returned into her bed. With a long and displeased groan, she pulled the blanket back up over her head.

“And now shut up, puppy, or I will make you.” Yeah, she was all but a morning person and grumpy upon waking up. Despite the thread of murder in between this trait was quite… charming, as it fitted to what he knew about her. Especially the grumpiness. Alistair’s smile at that ended in a yawn.

“I – “

“Shht!” she hushed him immediately.

Right. “Let me just –“

“Shht!”

“Okay, I’m going, leave you be.” He sighed through his teeth and drove a hand through his mussed hair. “You heard what Nithius said? About meeting with Harrowmont in an hour?” Lenya let out a annoyed grunt, which he took as a yes. “Good. See you in a bit, then.” With that, he closed the door behind him. Now he only had to cross the hall without running into Leliana, because Andraste’s mercy, she would never let him live this down.

“I must thank you once again, Wardens,” Harrowmont’s eyes stopped at Lenya and he frowned a little. Maybe because of her slumped posture, but more due to her rumpled appearance and perpetual scowl. She wore the same set of light and bit ill-fitting clothes as she did during sleep, which indicated she got up approximately five minutes before the meeting started. No really
surprising to him, given she was half-asleep when he left to get ready for the day in his own room. More surprising was how many of their companions had also followed the dwarven lord’s invitation to his study. Except for Shale, who probably couldn’t care less, everyone was present. Even, ugh, Morrigan.

Lenya reached up to rub her temple and hissed. Alistair ducked his head to look at her. “Are you okay?”

“Headache, ugh,” she replied in the same hushed tone.

"Jarvia and her carta are dead," Harrowmont continued, marching up and down in the room with his hands folded behind his back. He sighed a little. "I suppose it was unrealistic to expect them to surrender."

“The leader of a criminal organization surrendering without attempting to take us down first? ‘Tis such a naive notion I’m astonished how you have survived so far in this political landscape.”

She wasn’t wrong, but as always failed to understand the difference between having an opinion and sharing it. “Not helping, Morrigan.”

“The witch is correct!” Now these were words Alistair had never expected to hear from Sten’s mouth. “Expecting the enemy to surrender is foolish.”

Well, they have gotten a tad side-tracked here, didn’t they? It seemed it was on him to get them back on topic, seeing how frantic Lenya rubbed her face and scalp. She wasn’t paying attention, nor was able to. “Don’t you want to lie down? I’ve got this.”

“Nuhuuuu,” she grunted more than said, backing away from his advance.

"Will you speak to the Assembly now?" Yes, this he wanted to – *Thank you, Leliana.*

“Here,” Nithius approached Lenya from across the room and stopped in front of her. The feel of magic lingered in the air and pricked against Alistair’s skin, as the elf reached up for her head. “Let me help you.”

Harrowmont cleared his throat and Nithius sheepishly ducked away into the background again. Lenya was standing more straighter now, relieved from her pain. Good. As much he didn’t trust the elf, he was a very capable healer. Attentive and ready to help too, hopefully not only because it was Lenya. "I have no desire to go back on my word, but when Bhelen heard the news about Jarvia yesterday, he raised the stakes,” the dwarf said, frowning.

“What does that mean for us?” More tasks? Great. It never ended, huh?

“You really have to ask, puppy?” Lenya jeered. “The durgen’len is going to –

“Bhelen is forcing a vote in the next two days and by law, that prevents the Assembly from hearing any other pleas,” Harrowmont said, interrupting her comment. “To help with your troops, I will require your assistance one last time.”

“See?” Her scoff ended into a bitter laugh. “Fucking told you.”

“Tis awfully bold of you, assuming we do yet another task for you.”

“I share your frustration, dear mage,” Harrowmont looked at Morrigan and let out a sigh. “I wish it didn’t need to come to this, but the only thing which after Bhelen’s veto would secure the throne
for me and the troops for you Wardens is the voice of a Paragon. Sadly, Orzammar’s last living Paragon, Branka, took her entire house into the Deep Roads on a mad quest to uncover ancient secrets. No one’s heard from her since.”

“You… want us to find her?” Leliana asked to clarify.

Yes,” he said, turning to the bard. “Were she to return and endorse someone for the throne, the Assembly would be honor-bound to accept her wishes. My men have traced Branka's disappearance to an ancient crossroad named Caridin's Cross with this map.” Harrowmont walked over to a nearby shelf to pull a rolled up parchment and handed it to Alistair.

He carefully unrolled the aged map. The light in the study was dimmed – as it was everywhere in the estate– though suffice enough to make sense of the drawings on it. “That is a long way underground.” He hadn’t even had time to talk to Lenya about the Deep Roads yet and Harrowmont wanted them to venture there? Oh, no. Bad idea. Baad. “This would take way more than two days to reach.”

“I’m aware, Warden. It took my men three weeks to reach Caridin’s Cross, maybe more. I’m unsure.”

At this, Lenya tensed at his side, exhaled erratically. “Three weeks? Underground?” Oh uh. Dread rose up within, settling as bitter taste upon his tongue. He’d told her nothing about it yet, about what it entailed and meant for a Grey Warden. “In the Deep Roads? Whatever that is…”

“You don’t know about the Deep Roads?” Oh shut up Nithius! At Lenya’s shake of her head, the elf stepped out of the shadow again, at Harrowmont’s side. He had been nothing but friendly with her, yet right in this moment, his loyalty was with his dwarven lord alone. “You are a Warden, are you not? You should know about the Deep Roads! They were once dwarven thaigs reaching all across Thedas, but have fallen one after the other to the darkspawn over the centuries.” The elf paused to think, alas not to stop indefinitely. Short of running across the room and punching him in the face, there was nothing which could achieve that now. Oh, such tempting thought. “And it is also where the members of your Order returns to, when the taint becomes too much bear for a Warden,” he added, uttering the words Alistair had feared all along.

“What?” Worse than her trembling voice and tone was how she looked at him.

“Lenya, I, we should talk later –”

“No!” Even with the frantic shake of her head, she kept her eyes locked with his. They glistened with unspent tears, the hurt inside apparent. “Tell me, you fucking coward!”

“I…” His mouth worked, without words being formed. Why couldn't he just –

“There is a longstanding agreement between your Order and my people,” Dulin Forender – Harrowmont’s second – explained, unasked, as the silence in the study stretched uncomfortably. “It
entails a year fighting darkspawn in the Deep Roads at the side of the dwarves, before the Warden then leaves for their Calling. In return, we honor the treaty you have in your possession.” The dwarven warrior released a sigh and clicked his tongue. “This is basic knowledge about your Order and as such I find it troubling you, as a Warden, are unaware of it.”

“Geez… I wonder why,” she icily retorted to the man, then whirled back on him. “Asshole.” Shoving him with both hands out of the way, Lenya stormed out of the study and threw the door shut behind herself. Revas whined and barked at the way cutoff for him through the closed door, leaving him no possibility to follow his mistress. Maybe it was better this way.

For a long moment no one spoke a word and the awkward tension lingered like fog over the group. Alistair let his head fall into both of his hands. Damn, he screwed that up and thoroughly at that.

“Well done, moron.” Of course, the damn witch would never miss a chance to remind him of his shortcomings, even – or especially – now.

“Stop it, Morrigan! This helps nobody!” Leliana admonished her, making him look back up to the bard. “Should we… –“ she asked, gesturing at the door.

“No…” Alistair breathed. It shouldn't have happened like this. She… deserved better. “…leave her be. For now.” Better to let her cool off, before approaching her again for an apology and detailed explanation. She had a right to know.

“I’m sorry, Warden,” Harrowmont hesitated for a moment, tapping his chin. “I cannot refrain to ask… I understand that both of you are… quite young and your companion wears the Warden armor and is in possession of the treaties. However, is she truly a Grey Warden, or not?”

“That is what I have been asking for weeks,” the Qunari agreed, scoffing. “An armor does not make a Warden!”

Alistair glared at him. “Oh shut up, Sten!” Again this damn Qunari. Why was he even here when all they were doing was wrong in his eyes? And what were Harrowmont expecting him to reply to that? Should he travel back to Ostagar, search for the Joining chalice under all his other fellow Warden’s corpses and present it to them as proof that, yes, Lenya was indeed a Warden? Andraste’s mercy, the audacity of –

“Tis unbelievable,” Morrigan spat, her anger of the calm and cool kind, as she advanced on the dwarven lord like a prowling cat. “The Warden,” she stressed the word, its choice deliberate, “…has won this… tournament in your name, has she not? She has also killed the carta leader with our aid, has she not? Yet tis not enough to prove her and our worth to you?” She threw her hands up with a sneer. “I’m tiring of following every of your capricious whims, dwarf!”

Still reeling with the surprise that Morrigan, of all people, were speaking up in favor of Lenya, he almost missed the witches’ dramatic exit. Not as dramatic as Lenya, by far, but it made abundantly clear where she stood in this matter. Now it was his turn, huh? Oh, he had some few choice words for them alright.

“Yes, she is a Warden, my lord. I attended her Joining.” Why would someone doubt her, after all this? It wasn’t fair, downright insulting. Harrowmont backed away, stunned by his sudden aggression. “You know what else happened, twenty-four hours later? Our entire Order among with the king being slaughtered at Ostagar through Teyrn Loghain's treachery. Lenya and I… we are all that is left, the only survivors.” His voice cracked at the last bit, as despair slithered into his outrage. No matter, they wanted to know. So they would. His gaze fixed and narrowed at Nithius and the elf winced a little at being addressed. “So you have to excuse me that I had no time during
these past weeks to explain the ins-and-outs of being a Warden to her, because we scrambled to even survive long enough with a damn Blight going on. We are both the last remaining Wardens of Ferelden and, like it or not, all that stands between the Blight and doom.”

Alistair was shaking and neither coldness nor fear its reason. The pulse thrummed in his ears, drowning out every other sound. He hesitated for a second, at odds with his own rage, but nope, still not done. There was more to say, oh yeah. "And screw you,“ he turned back to Harrowmont and his second standing protectively at his lordship’s side. “… for implying she is not a Warden or Warden enough, just because she hasn’t memorized our Order’s history and rules from some old dusty book.”

Letting the map fall to the ground, he spun on his heels and left, not looking back.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading my story and chapter update. Let me know what you think and what you liked etc in the comments, maybe? It would be most appreciated.

Change notes: A looot. I cut out the whole carta part and focused on the before and after, rather. Also instead of having Lenya and Alistair drink together it is just Lenya now, drinking away her homesickness and frustration with doubtful success. The scene post tapsters is new, as well as the Harrowmont scene. The only element I kept is Lenya running away. We will be dealing with that in the next chapter ;)}
Standstill

Chapter Summary

After her flight from Orzammar, which ends at its gates, Lenya continues to have a bad time, but at least with fresh air, for once. Leliana tries herself in political maneuvering after years of abstinence from it in Lothering and, surprise, fails in it. Not as badly as Alistair did with not telling Lenya crucial information about the Wardens at least, but still. Also: unwanted midnight visits of companions, Revas being cute, and Lenya and Alistair patching things up, while fighting each other. Yes, this makes perfect sense, you will see (°_°)

Chapter Notes

Long chapter is long, but hopefully worth it. Chapter name is, like always a song title from poets of the fall. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You always thought there was tomorrow
Wish you could get back what you let go
   But it's alright if you fall
   You just get up, just go on
Never mind the hurt, even if you burn

-- Poets Of The Fall - Standstill

Her sprint of getting away, away, away ended at Orzammar’s gates. And there may or may not had been some threats involved to the people responsible of opening it, to get outside. Either way, now Lenya was standing atop the entrances’ steps and shielded her eyes against the wintry midday sun. Creators, the light was bright. Had it always been so bright?

“You again?” She turned to the source of the voice, distantly familiar. “Are you leaving, Warden?” She didn’t trust her eyes yet, so she couldn't visually check for affirmation. It seemed to be the same guy they had met the evening with the screaming human asshole at their doorstep, though. Only, what? Three days underground and her eyes were already this sensitive to daylight? Whatever should become of her sight when – no, not thinking about it.

“Ah, it takes a bit till it gets better ‘n you have adjusted,” the dwarf said, noticing her frantic blinking and rubbing of her eyelids. “’s for me this way, each time when step out for guard duty.” He chuckled. “At least, the sky hasn’t swallowed me up yet.”

Lenya gave it another moment as she inhaled the crisp mountain air like someone being under water for too long, and looked up to him. She still squinted a bit, but it didn’t hurt any longer. Yep, some grumpy guy like before. “Unfortunately, I’m not leaving. I simply needed to get away.”
“Hah, I see you are enjoying your stay in Orzammar, then? A nest full of viper’s, if you have to deal with them nobles. ‘nother reason why I enjoy being out here, doing my job. Out of reach for them too.”

“Tell me about it,” she huffed, rubbing her hands together for some warmth. It was cold. Which was wonderful, because it meant fresh air and… the sky overhead, instead of rocks only. Creators, she could see the sky, its endlessness. It was like coming up for air, being alive after being buried underground. No, not going back in there. How could she and for what? Ungrateful durgen’len assholes who kept moving the goalpost, condescending flat-ears and lying shemlen omitting vital information? Yeah, fuck them, all of them. And what they said about the taint becoming too much within time. Lenya gagged as she swallowed her spit, the remembrance of darkspawn blood suddenly potent and heavy upon her tongue. This wasn’t a cure, never had been. It only –

“Enchantment!” Lenya startled at the voice and face way too close to hers.

“Sandal, back away. Give the nice lady some room, would you?” The other dwarf – what was his name again? Bogso – Bodahn, yes, said and walked up the few stairs toward the entrance to her. “Warden! Such a joy to see you after all. You see, the trek up the mountain had been difficult for us with the cart.” He sighed. “Which is why we were running late and you were already gone. We figured you already entered Orzammar and, well...“ He made a face. “We can’t.”

“Friends of yours?” The guard asked, rather amused. “Given your entourage, you know a lot of different… people.”

“She saved us from a horde of darkspawn, she did,” Bodahn replied in her stead.

“Enchantment!” the younger durgen’len happily agreed. Could he really only say this one word? It was a bit unnerving.

“Despite being ’s scrawny as you are, I’ve no trouble to believe that after your display of violence at my doorstep.” The guard barked out a laugh. “Been much more quiet ever since, tho. Save for the stone-damned clamor of the merchants over there.”

“You are welcome,” Lenya said, grinning. It died quickly upon her lips again. What reason was there to be happy? She would have to return underground sooner or later, to deal with these assholes left behind. And then there was the matter of the Deep Roads, what it meant to be a Ward – no- not now. She was here to get away from it, however momentarily. Snowflakes swirled through the air around her as she directed her gaze into the distance, the sky dimmed in a muted white. It would be easy to disappear, to leave it all behind –

“Come, Warden,” Bodahn said, cutting into her thoughts. “Let’s go to our cart and warm you up.” His broad hand was warm at her shoulder, trying to usher her along. She shivered, rubbing her arms as she followed the two durgen’len further downhill. Getting properly dressed had been very low priority in her desire to escape. Not the smartest move as a simple linen tunic did little to stave off the mountain’s biting chill and wind. Easy to forgot how cold it was outside of Orzammar’s stale heat with its lava pools and vents. “Here, this should help,” he said and wrapped a blanket around her shoulder.

The thick wool of it helped indeed, but her teeth still chattered. “Th-thanks.”

“Not exactly the attire for a mountain trip, dear lady.” It was more a gentle nudge than admonishment and she welcomed it for the distraction his company offered.

“I did not exactly plan to leave...” she replied with a shrug and tugged the blanket firmer around
herself. “… but Orzammar is shit. Full of assholes.”

Bodahn rose an eyebrow and stroked his beard. “It is also my home. Or was.”

“My condolences, then.” Sandal gestured toward an empty spot atop their wagon, wanted her to sit down. “Good on you for getting away,” Lenya said, threw the blanket on the cart before jumping up on it herself. Reclaiming the blanket for warmth, she huddled into it as she sat down.

“Not that simple, it is, Warden.” Huffing, his voice adapted a wistful note. “Back in Orzammar, I ran a fairly successful business. Rare artifacts, you know; old things, grand things… the nobles loved them. Reminded them of the lost glory days, I suppose.” His eyes went to the younger dwarf stocking up the table in front of the cart. “I have found my place topside now, but being here in front of its gates… makes me a bit sentimental, I guess.”

“It sounds like you can’t return to what you once called home.” Her eyes stung and watered a bit, forcing her to blink to clear them. The cold wasn’t to blame for it, however. “I know how that feels.”

“Been burden with a lot, haven’t you? I’m not envying you there, Warden. I can only offer to help you in my own small ways.”

“Ma serannas.” She slipped into her mother tongue without thinking and flinched right after. “Thank you.”

Sandal leaned over the small cookfire at the side and produced a cup with a steaming beverage. He offered her it with a smile way too bright. “Drink.”

Well, at least he knew another word. Still, he was a bit creepy, if well-meaning. Frowning, she took the tea in both hands for warmth and listened to Bodahn’s story that led up to him fleeing Orzammar.

A noble accused him of stealing from her? Huh. However, another detail of her story caught her attention far more. “You ventured into the Deep Roads for treasure?” Why would anyone want to go there voluntarily? Ever?

“No, I paid casteless thugs to do this part of the work for me.”

“The carta?”

“By the stone, no!” Bodahn gasped out. “I would never! They were just some duster that needed money.”

“Good.” The sweetness of elfroot wafted into her nose, as she blew on the tea to cool it down a bit. “Because I have killed them all, yesterday.”

“W-what?”

Shrugging, Lenya sipped from the tea. “Yup, cleared out the carta headquarter in dust town for Harrowmont.” Asshole. “This reminds me, Bodahn…” She leaned forward to him. “Can you tell me more about the caste system and why your people separate each other?”

“A swift change in topic, I see.” He wiped his brow. “I’m no scholar, Warden. You best go to the shaperate for this.”

“But you originate from Orzammar, right? And I need more information about it, how it works.”
“Fine.” The man heaved a long sigh. “Might as well. Can’t promise it will be still accurate, as I haven’t been to Orzammar for long time. Topside suits me –us – more now.”

Lenya took another sip. It was good, warm and calming. And hopefully not poisoned. “After your story, and my own experiences there so far, I have no trouble believing you this.”

“For what is worth, my lord,” Leliana bowed her head, just enough to appear demur. “I agree to what my companions said. Tied as your hands may be due to the mechanism of politics, you still have to understand that you are expecting much of Ferelden’s two remaining Wardens.”

Harrowmont stepped closer to her. “What do you mean, my lady?”

Hah, got you. This had been too easy. “Your request, Ser. Sending them into the Deep Roads for weeks or more in search of a Paragon we aren’t certain is still alive, is a great detour from their initial important quest to fight the Blight.”

“Yes, but as you said, my hands are tied in this regard. I would like to support… both Wardens with everything possible to combat this Blight. However this requires their cooperation as well.” He paused, in a weakly disguised attempt for emphasis. “And that of Paragon Branka.”

“I see.” Stubborn ass. Leliana glanced up. “Even with agreement of my companions to undertake this dangerous trip to the Deep Roads, your time table doesn’t add up. If the vote is already in two days, this is simply impossible.”

“I will do my utmost to stall the vote for as long I am able, human.” He stroked his braided, white beard and tilted his head a bit. “I could present you to the Assembly to vouch for the Wardens and trip, which would hold off their voting until you all return from the Deep Roads. This would buy us the most time.”

Andraste’s tits, he blindsided her with this suggestion. It was nigh impossible to say no and to agree would mean they would search for Branka. Ugh, the years in Lothering had made her rusty in political matters, even if she wouldn’t want to miss it for anything. Her faith brought salvation, away from Orlais and all it entailed. “I will have to deliberate on your offer, my lord. And to talk to my companions, of course.”

Harrowmont nodded. “Please do.” He pointed on the ground. “And take the map with you, as well.”

Alistair didn’t notice her at first upon entering his room. He was stuffing neatly folded clothes and other belongings into his backpack.

She approached closer, making her presence known. “Hey… what are you doing?”

Freezing his motions for a second, his broad back tensed, as if being caught doing something naughty. He exhaled and rubbed the back of his neck. “Maker, I will never get used to how quietly you are able to move. This isn’t something the Chantry teaches their sisters, last time I checked.”

“Maybe I should start weaving little bells into my armor, then?” she deflected. No need to discuss her past right now – or ever, for that matter. Alistair had caught up on way too much of it already.
“Funny, Lenya said –” Alistair halted with a sigh and a shook of his head. “I made a mess of
things, didn’t I? And now we can’t even stay here due to that. Great.”

That explained the frantic packing, then. Leliana stepped at his side and lay her free hand on his
shoulder. He relaxed a bit. “You stood up for… –“ she paused, missing the fitting words. What
was Lenya to him, exactly? He harbored a fondness for his fellow Warden that went beyond
platonic, something he kept denying or maybe wasn’t even aware of. “… a friend,” she settled for,
eventually. It was better to leave it at that for now. The situation was already complicated enough
without bringing up his budding romantic feelings for their leader. “This is never wrong, Alistair.”

“Yeah, and look how well I did at that.” He let the tunic fall back onto the bed and wrung his
hands. “I should have told her. But there was never a good time for this and now –“

“She will come around.” In situations like this, it was so blatant to her how young and
inexperienced he was. This task was such a huge burden to bear, for both of them actually. Maybe
this was the reason why Leliana stuck around, despite Lenya’s apparent dislike displayed toward
herself. Sentiments such as sympathies had no place in a matter so far-reaching and crucial as to
fight the Blight. Help or not to help, there was no question which one of the options she would
choose. Always the former. As the Maker wanted her to do. “Just give her time to cool off.”

“You are the one to talk, Leliana. She is still holding a grudge for your com –“ His gaze fell on the
large rolled up paper in her other hand. “Why do you have Harrowmont’s map?”

The reason I am here, actually. “I stayed behind after you all left and talked with the dwarven lord
in more detail. I told him that it is impossible to go to the Deep Roads –“

“Oh, in that Lenya and you are agreeing at least. “He grimaced. ”Can’t say I’m fond of this idea
either.”

…and find the paragon in two days,” she finished, ignoring his interruption. “Either he promises to
hold the assembly off to vote until our return – hopefully with Branka in tow – or we have done
everything so far for naught. Seeing how the dwarves are unable to fulfill the treaty we have
without a king.”

“Great. And this is good news how?”

Leliana walked over to the chair at the other side of his bed and sat down. “Politics.” She
shrugged. “It puts the pressure on Harrowmont, to keep his side of the bargain. We delivered, he
still has to do so.”

His eyes flinted a bit. “You didn’t do this for the first time, either. Just… who are you? No simple
traveling bard, that is for sure.”

Damn, Morrigan had it all wrong, with him being stupid. Alistair was far sharper and more
perceptive than he led others believe. A great feint worthy of a bard, almost. Or perhaps she had
become too lax in keeping up the pretense accordingly? Either way, there was no turning back
from that point reached, anymore. “And what if I am not?” she probed. “Does it matter who I once
was, as long my expertise is of aid?”

Shoving the backpack to the side, Alistair sat down on his bed and folded his hands in his lap. “I
didn’t say that, Leliana. Your past is your own and I have no right to force you to talk about it.” He
let out a sigh. “Why the pretense though? The lies?”

His easy acceptance of the truth instead of judgment was… unexpected, if welcome. “Because I am
no longer the person I once was.” I am not like her. “I try to better myself, do better. I want to help. And my faith had guided me to you both. This is my destiny, why I am here.”

“Right. The Maker and the wilted rosebush, I remember.”

“And still, you don’t believe me?” There it was, the quiet judgment in his eyes, after all. “Lenya is different in this regard and I respect that, but you do believe in the Maker, no?”

“I do, but unlike you… I had not chosen this life for myself.” From the pockets of his breeches, he brought forth what looked like a larger coin and began to rub along its smooth surface with his thumb. It seemed his hands always needed occupation, struggled to remain still for longer than a moment. “So all fervor for the Maker went away when I was forced to pray for hours each day during my templar training.”

“Hmm, I always found it peaceful myself.” She tilted her head, frowned a bit. “You did not enjoy the quiet contemplation praying brought, then?”

“No,” he said, his tone resolute. Alistair swallowed audibly, indicating an unpleasant memory. “It was always so quiet at the monastery that I would start screaming until one of the brothers came running.” He looked up to her again and forced a smile. “Then I would tell them that I was just checking. You never know, right?”

He always did that, hiding behind humor. It was a defense mechanism honed like his skill with sword and shield. “I see. There is no harm in turning your back on a life that wasn’t of your choosing, nor the right one for you, Alistair. I’m happy you’ve found your place elsewhere, then.”

“In being a Warden?” Leliana nodded.”Yeah, the one thing I did chose for myself… and it fell apart. Ironic, isn’t it?” This time there was no humor covering up the lingering bitterness.

She leaned forward, resting her chin in one hand. “That is why I am here, to help. And so are the others.”

“I know.” Sighing, he squeezed his eyes with two fingers and rubbed his forehead. “I should stop moping, it doesn’t help anyone. It is just… I thought coming here, with aiding Harrowmont, it would bring us at least closer to gaining the treaty. Instead everything has become a damn mess and I don’t know how to fix it.”

“Start with talking to Lenya, maybe?” she offered. “Make her understand. This is something only you can do, as a Warden.”

“I might as well throw myself into a lava pit,” he scoffed. “That seems easier.”

“Then wait a bit, until emotions have cooled down.”

“Lenya is…” Alistair huffed out a laugh, and for a fleeting moment unbridled adoration appeared within his expression. Oh Maker, he really was oblivious to it all. “She can hold a mean grudge. You should know. To be honest, I wouldn't fault her if she'd ran off to her clan after all.”

“And leave you behind?” The Dalish wasn’t the most agreeable person, mildly put, but there was no way she would go this far. Morrigan aside, Lenya did get along with her fellow Warden best, despite all her attempts of convincing everyone else in their group of the opposite.

“What?” His thumb circled a bit faster over the coin’s surface. ”Isn’t this was people always do?” Shaking his head as if exterminating this thought, he stopped his hand and put the token back in his pocket. “Never mind, what are we doing about Harrowmont?”
“He gave me the option to speak in front of the assembly, so they in turn vow not to vote until we return from the Deep Roads.” She clicked her tongue, still frustrated about how easily she ran into Harrowmont’s political trap. “This requires our agreement to find Branka, of course. Otherwise we are at an impasse.”

“I feared as much. The Deep Roads, huh? I never have thought to –“ He let his sentence fade into nothing. “I don’t like this. While Lenya and I are immune against the taint running rampant there, Sten, Morrigan and you are not. It isn’t exactly the most hospitable place either from what I heard. So the thought of spending weeks there… is disquieting.”

“Yeah,” Leliana said, releasing a breath.” I don’t blame Lenya for being so vehemently against it, given the circumstances. We simply have not much choice in the matter, I fear. And to seek out to support Bhelen at this point would be… politically unwise, to say the least.”

“And even if we venture to the Deep Roads, there is no guarantee we will find Bran– Wait.” His face lit up, struck by a sudden idea. “There was this dwarven guy, in front of the tavern. Said Branka is his wife and he wants to search for her? Maybe he could help?”

“What guy?” They shouldn't put their hope in a total stranger, so she pushed the thought aside. One step after the other was the better approach. “Either way, do talk with Lenya later, yes? We cannot move forwards otherwise. And…” Leliana paused for effect and gave his backpack a pointed look. “...no leaving. This would undo all the work we have put into gaining the lord’s trust.”

“Right. You are right. Of course you are.” He suppressed a yawn and drove a hand through his hair. “I will do that. And thanks, Leliana. For… everything.”

However young, Alistair was a good guy. He was easy to be around with and talk to, with a depth hidden behind jocularity and insecurities. The Maker’s way was eclectic, leading through two rookie Wardens to everyone’s salvation. And in turn to her own in the end. Yes, this was good, this was right. “Anytime, Alistair.”

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With the break of dusk, the commotion near Orzammar’s gates had died down to a more bearable degree. The merchants were now less occupied with vying for the guards’ attention for the umpteenth attempt to gain entrance after all, and more with preparing their camp for the night. Small groups of durgen’len huddled around separate campfires for warmth, their light illuminated the darkness now fully spread around herself, like Bodahn’s blanket. She should have long returned, back underground, back to nothing but rocks, stale air and shitty people. Ugh.

“Warden...”

The stars were out, the tiny bright dots no longer shrouded by the clouds so prominent during the day. Sitting on the cold stone of the gate’s stairs and with her head skyward, Lenya inhaled, savored the crisp mountain air. Creators, she had missed that, would miss it upon her return. The twinkle of stars blurred behind tears gathering in her eyes. Her throat was suddenly too tight.

“Warden!” The voice behind her grew more insistent and a firm hand upon her shoulder startled her. She jolted up from her seat. “My apologies,” the guard said, softer now. “But my shift is nearly over ’nd I’m the only one around here who knows who you are, given your lack of armor ’n’ all. Thus without me, you will have no entry to Orzammar.”
“Good,” Lenya replied in defiance and wiped at her tears wetting her cheeks.

“Listen, I dunno what happened, nor do I care overly much, but nothing’s solved with running away, aye?”

“Haven’t tried it yet. For real, I mean.” Home was where the clan was, but that home was gone, likely far away from Ferelden by now. What would be the point in it then, anyway? There was no place to run to for her anymore. Even if, her ignorance would be only temporarily bliss with the Blight always at her heel, in the back of her mind. She was stuck with and in this mess now. Great.

"Do not start it then, girl." He nodded toward Orzammar’s gates. “You coming or not?”

Shit. No choice, indeed. Forcing her heavy feet to move forward, the gates’ begun to creak open at the guard’s signal. “I never asked your name, come to think about it.”

“Farkas,” he grunted more than said and added with a smile crinkling his dark eyes, “Have a daughter who is few years younger than you. So I know things aren’t easy, even without the Blight or duty as a Warden.”

“Yeah,” she breathed, fighting against the urge to turn and run after all.

“Heard about Ostagar, real kicker in the stones, that. Always liked the Wardens. Yours are an honest, straightforward bunch, unlike the vipers of nobles home.”

How wrong he was with that lying asshole of a fellow Warden, ugh. And could these fucking gates open a bit quicker, please? Creators, the noise of screeching metal was unbearable too. The lava heat coming from inside hit her like a wall, right before a furry ball storming through the gates’ crack did. Thrown onto her back by the impact of a muscled, whining mabari, Lenya struggled to fight off Revas’ slobbering affections upon their reunion. In between his barking, whining and, ugh, licking her face, Farkas chortled out a laugh. “Seems you have been missed. Well, all the best to you. May the stone be with you in all your endeavors, Warden.” His heavy steps echoed in the entrance hall and slowly grew more distant.

“Tis appropriate how the dog finds you before the fool,” said another, familiar voice. “For he is more intelligent.” Rolling to the side while shielding her head with one hand, Lenya jumped up, coming face to face with Morrigan. Arms crossed, the witch regarded her with a cool expression, which slowly but sure warped into something more smug. “As well as you having managed to leave Orzammar, despite the odds.”

Lenya exhaled. Even mingling with the remaining fresh air from outside, breathing had become a lot harder. Revas was still dancing around her, his permanent whining cut into the other guard’s gruff command to shut the gates. Trapped again. Fantastic. Kneeling down to the hound, she finally gave him the attention he so desperately wanted and drove her hands through his coarse fur, again and again. It was a grounding motion and a needed one too with how the heart hammered in her chest. It helped her not to panic – at least for now. Right, Morrigan. Counting silently to three, she glanced up to the witch. “Hadn’t the fortune to do so, I take it?”

She clicked her tongue, annoyed. “I wouldn’t have to try at all, if you would simply stop running away. ‘Twould not be asked too much of you.”

“Afraid I’d leave you alone with only Alistair as a Warden?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she scoffed with an air of indifference, but the way she shifted on her feet belied her facade. “I grow weary of coddling you, ‘tis all.”
“Coddling me?” Standing up, she rested one hand on Revas’ head and the warmth beneath her palm was comforting, rooted her in place. “I can’t recall you ever doing this, but thanks for worrying about me. It is appreciated.”

“I do not!” Morrigan protested, more out of reflex than real intention. Her exhale ended in a weary sigh. “I’m aware the situation we find ourselves in is less than optimal, however.”

“Yes…” Lenya took a few steps away from the entrance toward the side of the large hall, with the Paragon statues. “Mildly put. Which is why I needed to get away, sorry.”

With measured strides, she followed and came to stop beside her. “I blame that lying worm of a lord for demanding even more of us without any reciprocation on his side. Not you, Lenya.” Oh? Her candor was unexpected, if welcome. Very much, so. With a huff, Morrigan crossed her arms again. A subtle smile tugged at the edges of her mouth. “Besides, I’d have found a way to get outside if needed, to drag you back here. Willing or not.” Her smile shifted into a sneer. “The fool of a Warden isn’t bearable on his own and I refuse to be held responsible for my actions in his prolonged presence. Or the consequences it would entail for Ferelden.”

Hah, called it. Given her motivations were rather… predictable, with how much she disliked Alistair. “Get in line for this.” Facing him again, that lying asshole, was even less favorable than figuring out how to end this anew standstill in their task, by far. She should have hit him with a rock over the head when she had the chance, before it became too late and she too entangled within this creator-forsaken mess of a suicide mission. “Did you know?”

“About what?”

Lenya stared straight ahead instead to look at Morrigan. Even so, the statues’ picture blurred, veiled by tears. “Orzammar, the Deep Roads. What it means for Wardens. Asha’belannar was always eager to share her supposed wisdom with me, so you… –“

“What?” The witch huffed out loud, interrupting her. “I possess all of her knowledge as well? Do I truly have to remind you how my mother is only imparting what she desires others to know, including myself? Thus I have to negate your question and hope regarding my supposed expertise about the Wardens.” She shook her head, her sigh disapproving. “Before being thrown out by mother dearest, I hardly ever left the Wilds, at that. I fear you have to take your concerns to your fellow Warden, as fruitless as this will be.”

“I see…” she managed and blinked faster to clear her eyes. This had been no cure, instead it only extended her torture. Revas whined and licked her hand, sensing her shift in mood. It brought nary comfort, though. Everything about this… was wrong. She shouldn’t be here. She should have died in the arms of her clan, not being ripped away from them and poisoned with even more taint. Ironic how this would be what would ultimately end her life, if not a blade or stray arrow would precede the gradual taint-poisoning. Why was she even here, if the result was the same and the task ahead insurmountable? Why bother at all?

“Tis useless to dwell on the elf’s words, Lenya,” Morrigan said, her voice more subdued than usual. “More important is what we do with the lord’s audacity and how to proceed from here.”

She heaved her shoulders into a weak shrug. Why was she so tired all the sudden? “I don’t know, actually.”

Morrigan smacked her lips, looking up to a distinctive statue on the left. “This Branka, their paragon… finding her… tis a fool’s errant. Fitting for some in our group, I suppose, but it would take up weeks of our time, underground.”
“I hate the mere thought of it.”

“As do I, certainly. It appears our sole possible course of action, however.”

Wiping at her face, Lenya ignored her mabari’s attempt to console her in bumping his head into her leg’s side. “Story of my life, ever since your mother plucked us from that damn tower.”

“And yet… you came back, when you could have left for real.” She shrugged in the attempt to appear nonchalant, uncaring, though the relief in Morrigan’s voice told her otherwise. “That was a choice as well.”

“Yeah, great.” Lenya stared off at the wall opposite, weary of this, or any, conversation. “So is me not coming back with you to the estate. I’m not ready to do this yet and need time to think, some distance to figure shit out.” Revas let out an especially worried whine. “You can come with me, lethallin.” He replied with a more happy boof but stayed close. There was no chance he would let her out of his sight again. Well, then again, without her weapons a warhound was the best method to detract assholes from disturbing her, hopefully.

“Have it your way, then.” She whirled around, ready to leave. “Do be aware that we need act soon to end this standstill, or all we have done in Orzammar has been for naught.”

“I am, Morrigan.” Which was part of the problem, the reason for needing time alone. Lenya rubbed her eyes with both hands, but it did little to stop the burning within. “Tell the others I am okay.” Another lie, for she was not. Better than having to explain herself to everyone, anyhow. Fuck that. “Or tell them nothing, I don’t care. I will come seek you all out when I’m ready.”

The witch didn’t reply nor stopped her departure, but the hitch in her step gave away that she’d heard her, at least. Unlike Morrigan, Revas stayed at her side, as expected. Maybe she would feel better after napping for an hour – or twelve – in the Warden quarters. It was doubtful, but she was too tired to care about details like that now. Sleep, however fitful, was all what counted now.

“Right, let’s go then.”

Shadows shifted within the low light of the Warden quarters, snapping her awake. It must be middle of the night now, given the evening bell had rang several hours ago. Next to her, Revas became as alert and growled at the intruder. Jumping down from the bed, the mabari darted forward, ready to attack. He halted only in the last possible moment, when his alertness gave way for joy. Barking and whining he danced around the shadowed figure now nearly at the center of the hall.

What? Lenya jolted up. What was that about? Instead of the shadow growing smaller as the person approached it remained large. Ah. “Sten.”

“Warden,” he gruffed as reply and came to halt in the center of the main hall, close to her bed. Sitting beside him, Revas let out a boof, his tongue lolling sideways in a doggy grin. Well at least someone here was happy for the intruding Qunari.

“What the fuck are you doing here, at this time?”

“I could ask you the same, elf.” Unlike herself with her rumpled tunic and bed-hair, everything about the giant was immaculate. Even now, he was clad in the armor they’d retrieved in that stinky shemlen village. Every piece of it was exactly in place, freshly polished. Guess he didn’t slept then, which was no surprise, somehow. It would require to remove that massive stick out of his ass
beforehand – can’t have all that trouble, nope. At least this explained why he showed up here unannounced and unbidden in the middle of the night at her sleeping place, like a creep. “You keep escaping your duties,” he elaborated, unasked. “Your behavior is not acceptable.”

“Oh?” Lenya bristled and made herself taller when facing him after all. Ignoring him now would be for naught. Who the fuck did he think he was that he could lecture her? “Is this why you came here? Geez, thanks for telling me. Now leave.”

“You are a Grey Warden, are you not?”

“Yes,” she hissed, words forced out through gritted teeth. “Not by choice, mind you.” He scoffed, his lilac eyes narrowing. "Why are you here then?”

Because of a lack of choices? Hello? Did he not pay attention to anything she said just seconds ago? Ugh, why was talking to the Qunari always like running loops? Yes, he loved repeating himself with his speeches about duty and overall shitty opinions about women, but her own fascination for it was severely limited. It was annoying, downright infuriating. "I don't have to justify my actions to you!"

"Maybe,” he retorted, crossing his arms. "But if you fail, you will have to justify it to others. And even if you succeed, it will be just by mere chance.” Sten shook his head and huffed out a sigh. “Parshaara, you are a Grey Warden, yet you know little of your own order. Nor do you know yourself or what you are here for.”

“Why are you here, then? You keep disagreeing with everything I do, yet you still stick around.” Squaring her back, Lenya scowled up to him. “Why? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’m here on behest of the Arishok, to answer the question of what the Blight is.”

“Just the bane of my existence.”

“You are doing it again, elf.”

Another infuriating thing he did was using less words than needed and yet expecting everyone to understand him. “Doing what?”

“Speaking as if the Blight is not your duty, as a Warden.”

That again? Wasn’t he the one doubting her being one in the first place? She rubbed her eyes, to get rid of the sleep still lingering there. “I’m here, am I not?”

“Barely. You question your purpose, instead to act on its behalf, as you should.”

Yeah, yeah. Sitting back down on her prior occupied bed, Lenya wrapped the woolen blanket around her shoulders. She might as well get comfortable if he insisted on running his usual argumentative circles. Sten opted to continue standing while glowering down at her. Great. “What is an Arishok anyway?” she asked to break the cycle of repetition and hopefully being able to get back to sleep soon.

“The one who commands the antaam – the body of the Qunari.”

Ah. “And have you not to report back to your… elder?”

“Yes.” He sniffed harshly upon her word choice, though something in his bearing changed – he
became less upright and averted his piercing stare from her, blinking. “… But I cannot return home.”

“Oh.” He was sad, almost melancholic about the impossibility of home. That feeling was all too familiar to herself. “Why not, though?” After all, he had a homeland last time she checked, unlike her people.

Sten clicked his tongue just as loud, releasing the remainder of oxygen as a sigh. “It does not matter. My duty is here. As is yours.”

Revas stretched himself and audibly yawned, before he jumped up and plopped down next to her. The cheap bed creaked under the additional weight of the muscled warhound. He laid his head into her lap and while she scratched her mabari behind the ear, she peered back up to her unwanted guest. “Yeah, you turning up here in the middle of night to lecture me about it made that clear.”

“You did not return.”

Was that giant worried about her? What a strange thought. “I needed some time alone.” Her eyes narrowed upon him. “How did you find me here anyway?”

“Process of elimination,” he stated, flatly.

A little creepy, that. “Time and place, Sten. Time and place. This is neither.”

“You are wasting time.”

“Some people have to sleep, unlike you,” she said in an equally flat tone.

He huffed at that. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

*Why I am here?* “To fight. To survive,” Lenya replied without hesitation, encountering his stare with her own. “I owe it to my people. I think, at least on that, we can agree.”

His eyes flicked sideways as if contemplating her words. “Yes. We do.”

“Good.” Wow, some common ground, at least. “And now go the fuck to sleep. That is an order.”

For a second or two, it looked as if the Qunari wanted to protest, but all huffing and scowling vanished for an equally brief smile and nod. “See you later, Warden.”

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Despite all attempts to the contrary, Lenya didn’t find sleep after Sten’s departure. Giving up after another half of hour of tossing and turning, she got up again. The morning bell hadn’t rung yet, which left her with way too much time on her hands. Damn that Qunari for waking her in the first place! Scowling at the shadowed outlines of the hall, Lenya walked over to a small cupboard in the furthest corner. Silvery plates, cups and several tea cloths in blue aside, it held a small selection of old books in a shelf beneath. Taking them out one by one and piling them up on the floor next to her, she flicked through each of them. They were written in common language and all of them contained a part of the history of Blights. No answers to what it meant to be a Warden, the effects of the taint on oneself or anything remotely useful for her. Of course. Secretive assholes.

However, perhaps there could be gained some things from history after all, and she had nothing better to do anyway. Grabbing the nearest book with a shrug, Lenya settled down to read.
The Second Blight began in the Anderfels with the corruption of Zazikel, the Old God of Freedom, or the Dragon of Chaos, in 1:5 Divine, and lasted ninety years.

Immediately after the first sentence, she shut it close again. That Blight lasted ninety fucking years? She was nineteen and even without the taint in her veins, she wouldn't have so much time, by far. She put it aside, in favor and search of the other dates. As it turned out, the third spanned fifteen and the fourth Blight twelve years. Well, it seemed as if they managed to figure shit out after all. Still, more than a decade of battle and hardship and Alistair? Ugh, please no. This was bound to end in disaster, for both of them.

Eventually, Lenya settled down with the book which recounted the last Blight, and the tale of an elven Grey Warden named Garahel, who united Thedas against the darkspawn army. Ironic how history was repeating itself now.


“Lenya?”

Someone called her name and the buzzing of taint started to drone out the fragmented pictures of her dream. She snapped awake and several books toppled to the ground around her. Revas barked and whined in joy upon the arrival of yet another uninvited guest. So much for him keeping watch, ugh. What time was it anyway? Did she fall asleep while reading?

“No, this isn’t for you, Revas. Stop!” Not a moment later the mabari came running toward her with a large sausage between his teeth and spat it out in her lap. Wagging his stumpy tail in a way his whole backside was moving back and forth, he showed her a doggy grin, panting.

Lenya looked down at the slobbered food item, wrinkling her nose. “Thanks, I guess? You can keep it, now.” Revas let out a happy boof and snapped the sausage back up in his mouth to trot off into a corner to eat. This had been his plan all along, hadn’t it? That dog was too clever for his own good.

“Sorry. He just –“

“No!” Lenya barked at him appearing in the hall and was immediately on her feet. “You don’t get to come here with some shitty food and think everything is fine again. Asshole!”

“I…–” Alistair deflated with a sigh. “… guess I deserved that.” He put the packed bundle of food down on a small table at the side.”Look.. can we talk?”

“No.” She retreated further backwards, until her back hit the opposite corner. Several wooden training swords clattered on the ground, when her feet toppled them over.

“No?” He tilted his head and frowned a bit. “I know I messed up, royally so.” Stopping in both; words and motions, he huffed at his own word choice. “But I came here to apologize and –“

“No!” she repeated, louder now. Rage burned hotly through every fiber of her being, so much she trembled with each exhale. The fucking audacity of this shemlen, ugh! Lenya pressed herself into the wall, or else she’d launch herself at him and punch his stupid lying human face, again and again. Oh, how much she wanted that, wanted to have something to direct her anger on before she would implode of it. Halting, her eyes flicked to the training weapons at her feet. Yes! “Fight me instead!”
“What?” His frown deepened. “Here? Now?”

“Yesss...” she replied, the word escaping her in an angry hiss. “You were the one who wanted to spar with me...” Picking up one wooden longsword, she threw it into his general direction. To his credit and her surprise, he caught it in spite of the suddenness of the motion. “So fight me, coward!”

His gaze darted left and right. “There is not enough room here and I really think we –“ Pure reflexes hindered a blow to contact with his face. Too bad. Lenya gritted her teeth, and tightened her grip around the two shorter training swords she had claimed for herself. “Wait!” Alistair evaded her next attack and pushed the nearby bunk bed to the wall. More room, good.

Clack, clack, clack, clack.

Wood on wood, each of her attacks connected and were aptly parried. Yet he didn’t reciprocated any of them. “Fight me, coward,” Lenya yelled, if only to drown out the pulse thrumming in her ears.

Alistair shoved another bed back to the wall, to create a way out for himself. ”I’d prefer to talk...”

“Do both, then!” She whirled around herself, using the momentum to strike at him. While he was capable of parrying it, he’d forgotten about the second stick in her off-hand. It connected with his side, momentarily knocking the wind out of him.

“Ouch.” Coughing, he raised his hand to get her to pause. “No armor, here, remember?”


Gritting his teeth, he shifted his stance. “Fine.” He made one, two measured steps forward, forcing her to withdraw with his physical presence alone. “I messed up. I’m sorry,” he said, accidentally toppling over the table he pushed out of his way. Alerted by the noise, Revas gave chase to the other side of the hall, near the door.

“Hollow words, shem’alas.” Narrowing her eyes, she went for his left side. He was open there, without his shield. “You should have told me!”

“Yes.” Alistair side-stepped her blow. His stance adapted to her own, aware of his missing shield and the opening offered. He was good. No surprise here, though it only angered her more.

“You lied to me!” Clack. Clack. Clack. Her flurried advance put him into defense again, but he still possessed the greater reach. It allowed him to parry despite her added speed. Maddening.

“No,” Alistair exhaled, licked his lips and squared his shoulders. He advanced this time, however it was nothing a simple feint couldn’t diffuse. “I simply hadn’t – damn.” Moving out of the way of harm, his sword only hit emptiness instead of her. “… found the right moment or time to tell you.”

Rounding on him in the same movement, Lenya broke his anew attack with a thrust of her own. It forced him to disengage and pull back. He was unstable on his footing through the motion and using that, she lightly hit him with the stick in the back of his knee. It was hard enough however to uproot his stand and send him flat on his back. The wooden sword clattered on the ground next to him. “Ow.”

“Lying by omission is still a lie, shem.” She kicked his boot and coolly stared down at him. “Get up.” Alistair rolled to the side with a grunt, did as he was told. His breathing was quicker, more erratic now, probably to mask the pain of the fall.
“Your footing is amiss at times, it will get you killed in battle against a quicker enemy using feints.”

Oh, how satisfying and justified it was to put him on the ground, and she was ready for a repeat. Putting her wooden short swords on the bed behind her to fix her messy, long hair into a loose bun, he rushed toward her.

“So is not being prepared for an attack at all times!”

Lenya caught him in the corner of her eyes and snatched one weapon up to parry his strike with both of her hands. The impact of it and his strength pushed her down and she crashed onto the hard mattress. Immediately bringing both of her feet up, she kicked him in the chest, utilizing the momentum of the fall against him. Alistair stumbled backwards, lost his footing and landed on his ass, again. Yeah, she could get used to that.

Jumping up, Lenya strolled over to him, her breath as heavy as his. Glaring down at him, she held the tip of her wooden blade at his throat. “I’m always prepared for someone stabbing me in the back.”

Alistair locked eyes with her, far longer than needed. “I didn’t mean to…”

She whirled around, averted her gaze. “Funny how intent and effect are different things, isn’t it? Get up.”

“Only so you can beat me again?” His laugh ended in a pained grimace. “You don’t hold back at all, huh?”

“Do you?”

“Well, I don’t want to hur—”

“Don’t!” Clicking her tongue, she fixed her half-done bun and rolled her shoulders. “Our enemies won’t hold back either.”

“Err, right…” He cleared his throat and got back on his feet, stumbling a bit. “About the Wardens… what do you want to know, then?”

Lenya didn’t stand still, nor waited for him to recuperate from her kick. “What did the flat-ear mean with ‘when the taint becomes too much? What is the Calling?’”

“We Wardens are immune to the taint through the Joining,” he said and adjusted to her pace. They circled around each other, unwilling to give each other an opening. A rhythm she broke from only to reclaim her other weapon behind her. “But this immunity doesn’t last forever. Eventually, it becomes too much for the body to handle. In this, Nithius was correct.” He probed her defense with a thrust, which she deflected. “When this happens, a Grey Warden travels to Orzammar and goes into the Deep Roads to fight the darkspawn one final time, taking as many down as possible.”

Dread filled the pits of her stomach, though even now she did not stop, keeping pace with him. “How long?”

Alistair tilted his head, showed a smile that vanished quickly. “Well, in case you worried about growing old, or dying of old age… you won’t.”

*Clack, clack, clack.* Left and right, she let a barrage of attack follow. Alistair parried each, albeit with some difficulties. “That is not an answer.”
“Right. Sorry.” He frowned and hesitated, while catching his breath. “You've got thirty years to live. Give or take.”

Shit. Her posture deflated, her steps hitched. Alistair had the grace to not seize it for a strike. Instead his gaze lingered on her; waiting, worried.

I’m going to die.

That had been always certain, somehow, and should have already happened weeks ago, in the ruins… along with him. Tamlen. Still, having a definite answer about her future and the futility of such, was something wholly different. “This was not a cure.”

“It was, for the condition you were in, when arriving in... Ostagar.” He swallowed, the name of this place still heavy on his tongue. “The only one available, at that.”

Now the desperation of the Wardens during the last Blight made much more sense, their rush to end it all. They were running out of time. “I will not spend twelve years in your company for this shit!” If the prior Blight was any indication, half or more of her now-lifespan would be getting wasted on fighting this shitty Blight. Wonderful.

Alistair took a step forward, breaking the routine established. “What are you talking about?”

Instead of a reply, she tensed, gripping her weapons so hard her hands started to hurt. The anger was back, burning holes into her insides. Being a Warden was a death on rates, a miserable life of hardship and despair. And she had been thrown into that without any choice of her own, lured in with the promise of a cure for her sickness. “Fuckers. Secretive bastards.”

His frown shifted to a scowl. “This is exactly why we kept the Joining a secret from the new recruits!”

“To deceive them?” Lenya scoffed. “Lure them in with false pretense of glory, like that whiny knight back in Ostagar?” At what point had her voice risen so much, drowning out even the ringing in her ears? "Only to poison and send them to their death? Do I really have to spell it out why this is fucking wrong?”

“It saved your life, has it not?” He was yelling too and advanced on her, not in the intent to spar, but with raw anger. Its intensity took her by surprise, causing her to stumble backwards. She recovered, but not before her back hit the wall behind her.

“I never asked for that, for any of it!”

Alistair closed the distance between them with one, two brisk strides, his gaze pierced her own with its ire. “So what? You would have rather died?”

“Yes!” Lenya admitted through gritted teeth, before being able to stop herself. “Anything but this!” All this pain and fighting and suffering. Death would have been easier, instant instead of now coming in trickled down agony over decades.

Alistair didn’t reply. Not with words, at least. His breath fanned upon her face, hot and erratically, while his eyes, still locked with hers softened, somewhat. Towering over her with his height and mass, the smell of fresh, clean sweat bit in her nose. He was far too close for comfort, trapping her in place with the wall behind. Some of the anger roiling off of him like his body heat seemed to have abated, as he shifted, his muscles working. He blinked at last, licking his lips while searching for words. “I...” Another pause and his eyebrows drew together. “…I’m glad you are here, with me. You wouldn't be, if you had known. Neither would I have been, probably. But the Blight needs
to be stopped, so it is a necessary evil, alas. There wouldn’t be any Grey Warden without keeping these things secret.”

“Yeah, because this has worked out so well for us both so far, hasn’t it?” She fixed him with a glare, holding his gaze longer than intended. “But you are right, the Blight has to be stopped.”

No way she would be spending twelve years fighting darkspawn every day and least of all every minute of her shortened lifespan. Fuck that. It was time to get it done as quickly as possible, so she could leave all of it – and him – behind. Letting go off the training weapons, Lenya brought her hands up to his chest and gave him a hard shove to free herself of his proximity. Kicking the swords on the ground out of her way, they clattering once more. She stormed to the entrance, needed to escape from this place; its history and burden.

“We best get back to it, then.”

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes: I kept the element of Lenya running away, out of Orzammar, but otherwise it is completely new written and has nothing in common with the old version anymore. The reveal about what the taint means for a warden is happening way faster than in my old version too, which makes much more sense this way, imo.

Thanks for reading my chapter update. Let me know what you liked in the comments, it would be much appreciated <3
Seek You Out

Chapter Summary

After coming to a decision regarding the Deep Roads, Lenya is glad for some time alone to process what being a Warden means. Yeah, she still has a very bad time. Nithius and Zerlinda seeking her out for their own reasons won't change anything about it.

Chapter Notes

I am back on my bullshit. Yay? Here, I'm laying groundwork for the Deep Roads arc and tying up the remaining arcs/character thingies. The Orzammar/DR are the longest questline in the game, so naturally they need more time to be set up and more chapters in order to deal with it in general. I plan the other treaty quests to be more brief and concise, as far my chars let me do this, hehe.

Also thank you so much to everyone who has taken the time to leave comments and given me feedback so far. It really means a lot to me and helps me when I'm struggling with motivation to write, which is, alas, a lot lately. Sigh. Enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Past the point of no return
This labyrinth will up and burn
As bright as the puppet master grins

-- Poets Of The Fall - Seek You Out

With Revas at her heels, Lenya barged into Harrowmont’s study. “I’ll do it!”

The durgen'len lord sat at his desk, rifling through some paper he set down at her sudden arrival. “Warden?”

“Your stupid wild halla chase, I mean. In the Deep Roads.” Ugh, did she really have to spell it all out for him?

“Not a halla you should seek, but our Paragon Branka,” Harrowmont said, looking up to her. “Whatever this halla is, anyhow.” Nithius, aiding him with the paperwork, let out a snort. Ugh, this damn flat-ear was the last person she wanted to see, now or ever. “I’m pleased to know you have come to this conclusion, and about your return, of course. There is much to do then, first we have to talk to the –“
Lenya stemmed her hands into her sides and narrowed her eyes. “No.” The flat ear next to him snorted again. She would strangle him; very soon, very fast.

“No?” Harrowmont looked at her as if she’d grown horns all the sudden.

“I will be the one with my companions traveling the Deep Roads for possibly weeks on your behest, while your ass warms that very chair you are sitting on right now.” She exhaled, making a deliberate pause. “Hence I have conditions for doing so.”

“Hmm.” Harrowmont leaned back in his chair and stroked his gray beard. “And these are, Warden?”

“Payment for all equipment, which includes arms and armor as well as supplies that needed for the allotted time frame. Also I want guarantee of shelter for the people I leave behind, and for fulfilling the treaty made with the Wardens.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Warden.” Harrowmont rose an eyebrow, then nodded. ”Agreed. I will see it done. When will you be leaving?”

“I will need a couple days of preparation with my companions,” she replied, scratching Revas behind his ear and shifted on her feet. She was eager to leave, to be alone. “It would be wrong to rush into there like rabbits being hunted.”

“I look forward to finally end this stalemate,” Harrowmont’s voice was soft, understanding and deceiving. Either a classical act of appearing harmless or being a naive fool for real. After talking with Bodahn and learning more about the caste system of the durgen’len, neither of these options were appealing. It shouldn’t be her problem who rules Orzammar, as long it gets her the needed troop and support in fight against the Blight. “And I’m pleased by your return, Warden.”

*Can’t say the same.* With a nod and a forced smile, Lenya made her departure.

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My, you look as if a bronto ran over you, dear.”

The door to her chamber opened, bringing in a sheen of light from outside. Still, Lenya did not look up to see who it was. She lacked the energy to do even that. Glass clinked, so the person was carrying something as well. A servant, then? The smell of roasted meat hit her nose a moment later and her stomach protested its lack of food. How long since she last had eaten something? How many minutes had passed since closing the door behind herself and settle down on this weird, tall bed, unmoving in the half dark? It wasn’t like her to stare at and doing nothing.

Tutting, the person put the tray down on the table in the middle of the room and turned back to her. “I heard about your return, Warden and I’m glad, truly. But you look as if a bronto trampled over you.”

Ah, it was the gentle, older durgen’len woman. What was her name again? “Funny, I feel exactly like that too.” She hadn’t encountered an animal like this thus far, yet the imagery seemed fitting.

Erl-Olissa, yes, folded her hands over her round belly, canted her head. “Long night, then?”

“Long everything, more like,” Lenya replied with a sigh. Except her life, of course. This would be
short and painful, thanks to the fucking taint and being a Warden.

“Something I can help with, maybe?” The woman settled down next to her. “I have a daughter around your age. I know how it is.”

No, you really don’t. The problem with having only one other Warden in whole of Ferelden to talk to, was, well, exactly this. Especially if said Warden was an asshole, in so deep in blindly venerating their Order he would never see the sun again. How could he still defend their secrecy, deceit and overall fuckery? And why was there no help incoming from other countries? Even if the filthy shemlen Loghain would attempt to stop a larger group at the border, they could at least send some people as support. For fucks sake, just somebody who wasn’t Alistair, please. “Unless your daughter knows how to fight a Blight and survive on your own because your fucking Order cannot be arsed to help the two remaining Wardens in Ferelden, then no!” Whoops, these were far more words and harsher than planned.

“Dagna?” Olissa laughed out loud, didn’t take offense at her tone. “No, she is more likely to blow up our house with her tinkering and to talk as fast as a bronto at full speed than to be of aid in regards of the Blight.” She smiled, fondly. “I could hardly keep her from coming with me to work today, in fact.”

Lenya frowned at her. “Why is that?”

“Oh… because of you, of course. She is eager, well, in general, but even more to meet the Warden I work for and it seemed rude to impose on you, as the lord’s guest of honor. Especially since you are not feeling well today.”

“Ma Ser – Thank you.” At least someone with some respect for her, unlike a certain fellow Warden. Ugh.

“The least I can do, dear. I cannot promise that my daughter will be keeping her distance in the days to come, however. You see, she has this thing with the mages…” She chuckled, rolled her eyes a bit. “Dagna wants to go to the mage tower on the surface and study magic.”

“But durgen – dwarves can’t do magic, right?”

“Exactly. She has always these crazy ideas, hundred at a time. This is why I have been indulging her, much to the chagrin of my husband and her father.”

As tired as she was, talking to Olissa was nice. Even if it was just another reminder of how lonely she was, without them. “Leaving Orzammar, she would be casteless too, then.” It was stupid, to punish durgen’len going to the surface in banning them from returning to Orzammar forever. A waste of good resources and people, this tradition and rule of them. Stupid.

“This is why I’m very torn about it. On one hand, Dagna is bright and should see more of the world, experience it for real instead only through books like I did. But then, she would never be able to return home, to us.”

Her stomach sank and the lack of food wasn’t to blame. “I know the feeling too well.” Lenya blinked faster, to clear her eyes from unwanted tears. Would her clan accept her back? Could she even return to them, ever? Everything about it seemed impossible, an unreachable goal.

A firm hand squeezed her shoulder, pulled her into a friendly hug. Lenya let it happen, had already forgotten how it was to be held and be consoled. Ashalle always did – “It is a heavy burden you bear, dear. Especially for someone so young.” Her hand clasped her mouth, it was all she could do
to suppress her outcry as she shook with the sobs wreaking through her. Creators, she missed her... and everyone else.

There was a loud clatter and Lenya’s head snapped up to its source. Revas had helped himself to the meat on the platter, and ceased now all movement being caught red-handed. Or rather, red-pawed. He cowered, avoiding eye contact with her while his stubby tail wagged in conspicuous guilt. Not a moment later he opened his mouth and spat out the roast he stole, ducking even more.

“Oh my.” Olissa jumped up from her seat. “I’m sorry, Warden. This is all my fault, for preventing you from eating with my petty little problems for so long. I will bring you a new serving right away.”

Turning her head away, Lenya quickly wiped at her tears. How embarrassing. She’d nearly cried in the arms of a stranger. Sniffing, she gave her mabari a pointed stare, which he bestowed with a plaintive whine, still avoiding to look at her. “I was actually hungry, Revas, but now I don’t want it back anymore.” He whined again and let out a soft boof, as if apologizing. Lying down with his head ducked and ears flat, he eyed the half-eaten roast in front of him, but did not dare to touch it. Her exhale faded into a sigh. “But so were you, huh? Great, I’m supposed to rally an army, kill an archdemon to end this Blight and save all of Ferelden. All that when I’m even forgetting to feed my own dog?” Her being responsible for the fate of a whole nation was madness, and not only under this perspective. Olissa was correct; no person her age should have that amount of responsibility and pressure, ever.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Warden.”

She scoffed. “He is lucky he is as smart as he is or else he would have starved long ago.” Revas replied with a bark, yet ducked his head as soon Lenya looked at him again. As annoying as his thieving of food was, Revas’ guilty antics at least distracted her from her own sorrow. She let her head fall, rubbing her face with both hands. Why was she so exhausted? It had been only a little bit of sparring earlier, nothing like her usual length of exercise. “I think I will stew in some very hot ass-water for a bit. Sorry for causing you more work through my dog.”

“It is no trouble at all. Thank you for listening to an old woman rambling.”

“Like I said… you are not old.”

With Olissa closing the door shut behind her, Lenya walked over to the bathtub and started to peel herself out of her clothes. To sit in the same water for an extended period of time and to expect to get clean was still such an absurd concept. Most weird of all was how the runes produced the water out of thin air. Though its warmth was… relaxing, far more than a strategic dip into clear but cold stream water ever could be. Claiming her bar of soap and a washcloth from her backpack, Lenya sat down into already half-filled tub with a relieved sigh. The water was very hot, almost to the point of the temperature prickling her skin as her body acclimated to the heat. Leaning back, her muscles started to relax, the ache within dwindling.

The trouble with relaxation was the lack of distractions, which led to her throat constricting and a churn in her insides. Lenya dipped her head under water and counted till ten before resurfacing to keep the melancholy at bay. But the pressure continued to build up inside in spite of it; raw and unstoppable. Small at first, sobs rippled through her, until they became all-consuming and oxygen-robbing all too fast. She cried, mourning the inescapability of her situation, of all that was lost. Not even Olissa bringing her a new plate of food could cease the tears now, nor her outcry. At least the durgen’len had the grace to pretend she didn’t notice.

“The taint is going to kill you!” Half-peeled of its flesh and blackened, Tamlen's face twisted into a
Jolting awake, Lenya splashed water on the ground, her heart racing. What? She blinked, quickly turning her head to each side. Did she fall asleep in the tub? The water, now tepid at best in temperature had pruned her skin, affiriming her theory. Ugh, great. After rinsing her head underwater to get rid of the remaining soap in her hair and dried snot on her face, she got up and stepped out of the tub. Heedless of dripping water in a trail behind her, Lenya steered toward the plate of food, now placed higher up on a shelf. Revas still could have reached it if wanted, but he had refrained from it. Instead the mabari was lying in the shadowed corner of the room opposite of it and her. His head was turned away from her as if still atoning for his thievery. He hadn’t touched the half-eaten roast either, even after all this time.

“Revas...” He whined and perked up a little, yet continued to stare at the wall. His stubby tail wagged hesitantly. “It is okay. Come here. I’m not mad anymore.” The dog uttered a soft boof which ended into a vocal whine and very slowly trotted over to her to lie down at her feet. Shivering, Lenya retrieved the blanket from the bed to wrap herself in it for warmth and sat down, platter in hands. The meat and vegetables were cold now, of course, but she still wolfed it all down in what must been a record time. Creators, she was starving and always hungry lately, no matter the amount of food eaten. This wasn’t normal, wasn’t it? Then again, this was her first food of the day and it was, what? Midday or afternoon already? Still... weird. Shrugging, Lenya ate the chunk of dark bread, savoring it as if it were the sweetest cake. Another thing to ask her fellow Warden, then. Since there was no one els –

A knock at the door halted her thoughts. Wrapping her blanket tighter around herself, she stood up to answer the door.

“Warden...” In front of her stood Zerlinda, the durgen'len they met in Dust Town. And whose father she had punched in a fit of outrage in the tavern later. Oh. “They nearly didn’t want to let me get through to you until the talking statue objected.” Unlike in Dust Town her clothes and face were clean and in her arms she held a bundle which wriggled and cooed. Oh. The young woman turned to leave. “Now I see why. Sorry for disturbing you.”


“Th-thank you. I won’t bother you for long, promised.” Revas got up, sniffing curiously at the new guest’s arrival and barked out loud once. Zerlinda winced at the sound and pressed the wriggling bundle closer to her chest.

“Down, boy. Be gentle.” The mabari huffed at that, half-agreeing, half-annoyed, and stretched himself with a yawn before settling down again.

“What curious companions you have,” Zerlinda laughed, nervously. “A golem, a giant nug –“

“Hound. A mabari, to be exact. Not a nug.”

“Right, sorry.” She glanced about the room, exhaling audibly. “The reason I came here was... to thank you. My father came to me the next day and accepted me...” She paused, nudging the baby in her arms as it fussed. “… us back into the family.”

“What?” Offering her a chair, Lenya sat down herself and wrung out her still sopping hair with a towel. “But I... punched him?”

“I… don’t understand.”

“You see, my father is more a man of actions than words… and yours made him realize that he is abandon me and my son was wrong. His sense of tradition and the rules of our people was what drove so far.”

Huh. This was very different from what that durgen'len told her in the tavern, but it was best not to repeat these hurtful things back. “I see. Good to know it worked out for you, then.”

“For both of us.” Zerlinda turned her son around in her arms, so he was facing Lenya’s side and rocked him. He was so small and wrinkly, an infant of a few weeks, at best. “His name is Enron, do you want to hold him?”

Oh… no. No.” Lenya bristled, stared wide-eyed at the da’len. How it wriggled in her arms, like a worm. “I might drop and hurt him. I’m not good with kids, really.”

“I wasn’t either,” she replied, kissing her son’s head. “But you will get used to it and learn along the way.”

Lenya made a face. “Yeah… I doubt I will. Ever.” The thought of being bound to and responsible for a completely helpless being was terrifying and not only due to her now-shortened lifespan. “I prefer my independence.” As little there was left of it, anyhow. “There is something I want to ask you, however.”

“Me?” She frowned. “Why?”

“You are a durgen'len, one who has lived on both sides of a caste, so to speak.”

Zerlinda shifted in her seat. “Yes?”

“If you could choose a king, who would that be and why.”

Enron cooed into the speechless silence of his mother. “I… it is not my place to say this. Especially here and with you… supporting Harrowmont.”

“Yes, I do. Out of necessity. For the treaties. I’m a Grey Warden, after all.” Why was it so hard to understand that she wanted the full picture of the situation? Particularly from someone who had been casteless for a while and experienced the cruelty of her people’s traditions? “However I knew nothing of the caste system when I choose to do so, and I still lack the full picture to draw my conclusions from there.”

“I see.” Her shoulders tensed and she licked her lips, glancing about. She wasn’t comfortable with the nature of this question and large part of the reason was this place here. “I’m still not sure how I can be of aid, and why.”

“Meeting you… well, it was shocking to see how different you people treat each other. You are all durgen'len and yet…” Lenya left the rest of her sentence hanging in the hopes she would pick up on it after all. It was perhaps a bit pushy, but needed, since Bodahn knew nothing of the current situation in Orzammar. Unlike Zerlina.

“Yeah, as an outsider I see how this can be confusing.” She let out a sigh and took the verbal bait. “Fine. Do you have a piece of paper and an inkwell? I’m not comfortable with saying it out loud.”

So, leaving written evidence was better? Well, whatever. Lenya pointed toward the desk in the corner and the durgen'len got up from her stool. “Burn it afterwards, please. Now stretch out both hands.” She did as the young woman told her, which in retrospect was a bad idea. Because she
placed her son, this wriggly bundle, within Lenya’s arms and corrected her hands to support his head, before walking over to the desk.

Lenya glanced down to the infant and he peered up back at her, his small face slowly contorting in discomfort. *Yeah same here, da’len.* She went completely still, and kept her breathing to an even level despite the panic rising inside. *Do not drop him, do not drop him, do not – ugh.* Darkspawn, undead, ogre, bandits and other assholes? No problem, but kids? Creators, no! And now he was about to cry as well?

Shit. Shit. Shit. What to do? Enron started to fuss, kicking his small feet and cried. Loudly. Revas got up to sat down next to her and cocked his head with a whine. Probably to see what this strange noise was about. “Help!” Lenya mouthed to her mabari under the kid’s incessant wailing, which increased in volume even further, to near screeching. His balled up face grew more red, eyes frantically searching the room for someone that wasn’t the person holding him. Again, this feeling was mutual between them. Revas huffed and trotted over to Zerlinda to retrieve her, thank the Creators. This was terrifying and she completely out of her depth.

“Aw, he is hungry. Sorry, Warden.” Yeah, a bit haste here, maybe? “I’m done now, don’t worry.” With that said, Zerlinda exchanged the da’len for a piece of paper. As soon the infant was with his mother again, he quieted down. No hard feelings there, as this was a better situation for everyone involved. She rocked him in his arms, made it look so easy. “I have to go now. I took way too much of your time as it is and I need to feed my son.”

“Right.” Lenya audibly exhaled, daring to move for the first time in minutes that seemed like hours. She held up the paper, waved it around. “Thank you for honoring my request.”

“No problem. Do remember mine, yes?”

“Of course.”

Enron was still fussing, but this didn’t stop Zerlinda from turning around once more. “By the way, what is your name, Warden? I never asked.”

“Lenya.” She paused, frowning. “Why?”

She shrugged with one shoulder. “Just curious about the name of the person who helped me so much. May the stone ground your way during this Blight and beyond, Lenya.” Opening the door with one hand and holding her baby, Zerlinda set out to leave – only to nearly run into another person in the hallway.

“How nice.” She gave him a fake smile. “And yes, please do so.” With that, Lenya shut the door in his face.

Half an hour later or so, Nithius re-appeared in her doorframe. Now dressed in comfortable, simple clothes and with Zerlinda’s note safely stowed away, it was less a hassle to see him again. If only
by a margin.

“What is it you want?”

His stride through the room to its center was measured, elegant. “Not taking much of your time, given your mood.” Reaching the chair prior occupied by Zerlinda, he sat down. “First I should apologize, I think. It wasn’t my intention to cause you distress, Warden.”

Why was it always when people said they didn’t intent something, they did it anyway? “Lasa adahl su nar masa!”

“Hmm, fair.” He nodded, still smiling. His mild-mannered antics were starting to piss her off even more. “It will be hard to find a tree for this, in Orzammar.”

“What?” she scoffed, prodding him further. “Is the leash of your lord too short for you to leave?”

“No, I could. Theoretically,” he replied in the same calm way, folding the hands in his lap. It was infuriating. His green eyes reflected the sparse light within the room as he looked up to her. “But I wouldn’t survive for long. I have been labeled an apostate and escapee of the mage tower, to be slain on sight by templars.” His expression darkened. “To them, it does not matter that my expertise is spirit healing and support, not offense spells. I am dangerous because I exist and this outside of the tower’s walls. Orzammar however has its own set of rules, especially for noble dwarves. Thus the Chantry can’t reach me here.”

His explanation made sense, in some twisted logic way. “Due to Harrowmont’s protection?”

“Yes. The Chantry is depending on Orzammar for its lyrium supply for the templar army and can’t afford to anger the assembly which regulates the trades.”

“And the assembly is full of noble durgen’len, interested in staying healthy and alive… through magic.”

He huffed out a laugh. “You catch on quick.”

Lenya rolled her eyes. “I wish I wouldn’t have to slice through all that intricate halla-shit to get a somewhat straight answer, though. It is tiring.”

“Oh right.” Nithius cleared his throat, misunderstood her words as though they were about him. No, it was about the entirety of Orzammar’s system, the hoops required to jump through to get anything into motions. So convoluted and annoying. “The reason I’m here is because Lord Harrowmont ordered me to accompany you to the Deep Roads. Part of showing his goodwill, I suppose.”

“What?” She leaned forward in her seat, leaning her elbows on her knees. “Why?”

“Think about it, Warden. The journey will be a long one; weeks at best, or even longer. Hence it is a beneficial investment on both sides: You get the aid of my healing magic through and after the many battles encountered and my lord the peace of mind that both Wardens make it back safely with Branka’s approval.”

“I see.” Harrowmont’s attempt to keep control in sending his watchdog with them, huh? Lenya straightened her posture again. Then again, that flatear made a lot of sense in regard of his magic being tremendously helpful in a place filled with darkspawn. “Hmm, you are not wrong. But what is in for you?”
“I like your way of thinking, Lenya.” She narrowed her eyes at his intentional usage of her name, which only added to his amusement. “So practical. I have no illusions here, it will be dangerous and I would be much safer staying behind.”

“But?” *Quit bullshitting me with artificial dramatic pauses, asshole.*

“I miss the sun, the sky. The fresh air, yes even the trees that I should shove up my behind, according to you. And you are a Warden, right?”

“Oh *now* you don’t doubt that fact anymore?” Nothing to be proud of with poisoning yourself with darkspawn blood to the point of dying much earlier, yet his way to doubt her authenticity as a Warden was belittling. “Took you long enough.”

“For which I apologized, as said.” Nithius cleared his throat and exhaled audibly. “I want you to conscript me. *After* the Deep Roads and my last task is done for Harrowmont, that is.”

“I know I keep repeating myself, but what?” Why would anyone want this? Freely?

He arched his bushy eyebrow. “Again, an easy equation, lethallin. As a circle mage, you only become free of the tower when either dead or being a Warden. I prefer to choose the latter.”

She scoffed under her breath, loud enough to let Revas’ head perk up with a quizzical whine. Both had the same outcome, if with some delay. “You are free now, are you not?”

“To a degree, yes. Orzammar has been my home in the past four years and I’m grateful for all Harrowmont did for me.” He sighed. “However, I do think his ascension to the throne would put too much spotlight on my existence. It could raise too many questions prior left unasked.” Wasn’t it an open secret already? Corra told her of Nithius first and that tavern she worked in wasn’t exactly located in the diamond quarter. “There is a reason why I don’t wear robes,” he said, pointing at his simple tunic and breeches, both in dark colors. “Easier to blend in this way.”

“Yes, because being an elf in Orzammar is not conspicuous at all...”

“Touche.” His amusement about her retort was more disarming than annoying, for once. “Still more conspicuous than to run around with a large staff strapped to my back, like your grumpy friend.”

Living for someone's approval could only end in disappointment, so it was great that Morrigan and her thought alike in this regard. “She was raised outside of these shemlen-made towers. As it should be.”

“Oh?” Nithius perked up, his laugh easy. “Interesting. And you won’t find me disagreeing there, lethallin. I escaped the Circle and lived with the Dalish for exact these reasons.”

She rolled her eyes. “You mentioned *that* a couple times, yes.”

“Don’t worry I won’t bore you with my past now.” The corner of his mouth quirked up, in sync with his eyebrow. “Another time, perhaps. For now, I have a gift for you, to make your decision to recruit me even more bearable.”

Even more? More like, at all. And disregarding that, he still had no idea what he was asking here, nor its impact. Nithius unfolded a paper held in his hands and straightened its crumbled edges. “What is this?”

“One of Kinloch Hold’s secrets, I sort of permanently… borrowed. From the Circle of Magi...” he
corrected when he noticed her questioning gaze. “My studies there focused on healing arts, which included herbalism and how to effectively use it in potions. During it, I found this recipe, dated back twenty years, and most interestingly… commissioned by King Maric himself.” She gave him another blank stare. Creators knew she couldn’t give two shits about shemlen kings. Never had, never would. “The king before Cailan, his son?” he clarified. Ah, both dead, then. Whatever. “Anyway, it is a recipe for a potion you will find useful, since it protects its user from the effects of the taint. An anti-corruption potion, if you will.”

“Oh.” Now this, this was useful. Very much so. It would allow to take their companions into the Deep Roads without losing them to the taint. “And it works?”

“Yes, of course.” He nodded, locking eyes with her. “House Harrowmont is using it for their Deep Roads expeditions for years now. Gives them an edge to the competition.”

And yet the durgen'len lord wanted them to find this Para-thingie person on their own. Figures. “Since your arrival, I wager?”

“Maybe?” A grin spread within his face. “And it is yours, if you take me with you. To the Deep Roads and beyond.” That line of argument and offer was clever on his part, if borderline blackmail. She appreciated his practicality, however. And the advantages his presence would bring, especially during their times in the Deep Roads. Lenya squinted at the recipe, read it in full for the first time. Magical distillation was needed for its creation, among a couple of rather rare herbs. Ah. “Could you… teach Morrigan how to create these potions, then? Before we leave for the Deep Roads?”

His expression brightened. “Is this a yes, then?”

“I… still need to talk this over with pup – Alistair,” she corrected herself with a shrug. “But I can’t see why not. Your funeral, flat-ear.”

“Love your optimism, Warden.” He chuckled. “And if your companion doesn’t eat me alive upon entering her room, I will do gladly teach her how to brew the potion, yes.”

“I will tell her to refrain from it.” She paused. “For now.”

“Good.” Standing up with newfound energy, he walked over to the entrance door. “I will get out of your hair now. Enasal shiral, lethallin.”

Lenya couldn’t exactly say the same, for his exuberant personality would induce many, many headaches. Which he could heal then. Huh. She waved with the paper still in her hands. “What about –“

“Keep it. It is a copy, anyway.” With a broad smile in his face, Nithius closed the door behind himself.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:
The dynamic between Nithius and Lenya has changed. He is not as important to the story as he was in my old version, but still has a larger role. You will see. New is also the inclusion of Zerlinda here … for reasons. Other than this, it serves to set up things
for later/the Deep Roads and is newly written.

Thanks so much for reading. Tell me what you liked, maybe? It would be most appreciated.
Someone Special, Part I

Chapter Summary

Alistair is awkward but earnest, Lenya is glaring and grumpy. What else is new? Well, them finding another common ground and similarity is.

Chapter Notes

I am on time in updating for once, wheee. Ngl, this one is still one of my fave chapters i have written to date. The dynamic flows so well between them and yeah, everything else. I really like it and i hope so will you. It is bit shorter one this time (for me anyway haha) but it stands wonderfully on its own, imo. Pure Lenyastair too, to make up for its lack last time ;)

Thank you all for your feedback so far, it is always so motivating to see that good old wardenstair stories still get read, and mine among them in particular, of course ;)
Enjoy?

And ever further I run to find her
I yearn to define my life
Placing my faith in chance to meet me in half way

- Poets Of The Fall, Someone Special


Lying flat on the back, Alistair released a breath he held, but the tension inside stayed. The heat did too, though this was at least understandable after doing four sets of crunches in a row. Sure, he’d rested after the short but intense spar with Lenya, yet found himself fidgety again only two hours later. Of course he had always been an active guy and struggled to sit still for a longer period of time. However, something was different today and it nagged at him like an itch he was unable to scratch. Exhaling again, he lay still, listening to the accelerated beat of his heart in his chest and ears. The marbled stone was cool and smooth against his bare back; a welcome contrast to his heated skin. Normally, the routine of his workout should have been enough to quell his need to move, should have been more satisfying than it truly was. Why was that? What was different?

Alistair sat up, rubbing both hands through his face and pinching his eyes. The breath released into his cupped hands was hot and hitched when her picture appeared before his eyes. Lenya, pressed at the wall opposite, glaring up at him with all the anger fitting to the intensity of the moment. He’d invaded her space without thinking in his own indignation, came too close to her. The warmth of her and the wrath vibrating underneath her skin had been palpable. The remembrance of it ghosted
over his skin even now and ended as a shiver down his spine. He licked his lips, let his hands fall sideways with a sharp exhale.

Oh. Oh no. This couldn't be happening. Not her, not his fellow Warden. It was the least convenient time, place and person to develop some sort of weird… crush on. This was it, right? A stupid fixation emerged in the spur of the moment, when there was a Blight to concern himself with instead. Which was far more important than… this nonsense. Maker.

Sure, her walking out on him without any resolution to their fight – quite literally, mind you – bothered him too, and he could pretend that was all there was to it. But that would be a lie, wouldn't it? On the other hand, maybe he was simply overthinking it due to how Lenya tended to keep her feelings wrapped up under layers of shrewdness and prickly hostility. How could he not at least attempt to peel them away, to get to know the person hiding beneath? It was only a natural urge, especially when this person was his fellow Warden and her careful crafted facade crumbled away in such moments, baring her much more vulnerable side. Her anger had been absolutely justified too, come to think about it. She never chose to be a Warden, unlike him. They were so different in many things and thus each progress between them hard-fought but precious. Perhaps this was why he was… he was –

“We have to talk.”

He froze, while his heartbeat sped up. Of course she would appear in his room just like this, without knocking. While many things about her remained an enigma, he could always count on her unpredictability. “Lenya…”

Her name sufficed as acknowledgment for her and so she closed the door and the distance between them. Now standing behind him, she seemingly waited for him to turn around and facing her. Right, he should do this. Any moment now. Really.

She clicked her tongue. “You know… Revas stole my food earlier. Being confronted with it, he couldn’t face me. You both got this in common.”

“Thanks?” He cleared his throat. Come on, how hard could it be? It wasn’t as if she suddenly had grown a second head or something. She was still same old Lenya, after all. Her comparison of him with her mabari only proved that. “I haven’t expected to see you again today, that is all.” Which wasn’t even a lie, not after how their last encounter ended.

“Me neither, puppy. But there are some things we need to discuss.” She huffed. “From, ugh, one Warden to another.”

Ah. Yeah, he could do that. Probably. So he turned and looked up to her. Strands of long, unkempt hair framed her bemused expression. She wore it open, not caring for its unruly state. Same for her oversized tunic, hanging loosely over her hips. It was the epitome of who she was, in a way; choosing practicability over appearance. His stomach fluttered nervously. Too late to back out now, either way. “I… see. What is it you need?”

“I wrote a letter to the asshol– other Wardens outside of Ferelden, in case of our demise in the Deep Roads.”

Right. So when exactly had she changed her mind about helping Harrowmont? “H-how nice.”

“Just thinking ahead. I also want to leave some of our companions behind, so that the letter can be delivered in case we don’t return.” Her words were clipped and detached, as if she was going through the motion. Or was still holding a grudge for him. The latter was more likely, given her
perpetual scowl.

“I… uh, are we good? You walked out on me and we never truly resolved our, um, disagreement, to be honest.” Disregarding her annoyed huff, he added, “I would like to do this first, before proceeding. Since it will be easier to work together, this way.” He licked his lips. “And… I would like that too. I don’t want to fight with you anymore, Lenya.”

Fidgeting with the letter in her hands, she shifted from one foot to the other. Her stiff posture deflated somewhat with a long sigh sent to the ceiling of his room. “Fine. Depends on if there are any more secrets you have yet to tell me, though.”

Secrets? Oh. That. Yes, this was a big one, wasn’t it? But was it fair to drop this on her after the first one quite literally exploded between them? Given, ninety-nine percent of it was his own fault, for keeping it from her for so long in the first place. And *that*, well this other one had the potential to do as much harm. Damn. Maybe it would be best to start more… small, so he could work up the nerves for telling her about it. Maybe. “About the taint?”

She crossed her arms. “And the Wardens.”

“Well, there is something. Aside the wonderful fact of not growing old, as we, err, discussed, there is also the fact of us healing faster, having enhanced strength, endurance and stamina.” So far, so good and harmless. “Tell me, have you felt particular hungry lately? As if there is never enough food?”

“Creators, yes,” she breathed, her shift in tone surprising. “I just went to have –“ Catching herself, she left the rest of her sentence hanging. She shifted and a dust of pink covered her freckled cheeks, which was… adorable. Maker, stop thinking like that. “Why is that?”

“I’m not exactly sure, beyond the fact that it happens to every Warden, especially in the beginning. Nope, he wasn’t going to tell her about his own excessive midnight raids of the castle larder involving gravy. Never. “You will get used to it, eventually.”

“So, just like the nightmares each fucking time? Nothing to worry about, right?”

Here they were again, with her slipping back into her confrontational persona. Alistair wasn’t taking the bait. “Yeah. I suppose it is due to our enhanced stamina. Needs more food to fuel all that… energy.” Damn, this made more sense in his head than said out loud.

“I see. Makes sense, in a way.” Really now? “Like halla need more food to stay healthy in Ferelden’s harsh winter.”

He had never seen a live halla, as close as these animals were with the equally elusive Dalish, but still… her comparison seemed sound. “Don’t your people travel a lot, especially to escape the winter here?”

“It depends. A long journey like that isn’t always possible.” Oh. A straight answer, how surprising. He’d not expected one, particularly not when it came to her people and clan. “But you digress. What else is there to know?”

“Sooo, no stories of you raiding Harrowmont’s larder yet to sate your increased appetite? Aww.”

His attempt at humor fell flat and resulted in a pointed stare of her. “More hunger? I can deal with that, human. Already have, in fact. During and after each long hunt for my clan.”

Right, Ms. Killjoy, have at it. Back to business, then. “Um, well, there is another caveat to being a
Warden?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Yes?”

Oh Maker, she was truly going to make him say this, huh? “The taint, you see, also makes it very difficult to.. err” – crap, crap crap, he was so dead. “…get pregnant?”

“Eww, boundaries.”

“Gladly.” Alistair coughed into his hand and the heat in his cheeks spread further downwards, resulting in a full body blush. Wait, what? Oh no, this was so not appropriate, to sit here shirtless in front of her. Why didn’t she say anything? Then again, why would she, given she faced him fully naked before. Great, now his cheeks grew even hotter with that memory recalled, and why wasn’t the ground opening up when you needed it to? Maker, we don’t really tal –

“What is this?” Lenya asked and pointed at the middle of his chest. An odd sort of purple bruise had formed there by now, distinctly resembling a footprint. Hers, to be exact.

“You… kicked me, remember? Hard, I might add.”

“Oh, right.” She squinted at the large bruise and he squirmed under her stare. A sovereign for a shirt right now, Maker help him. Or several gold pieces, even. Before he could cross his arms over his chest to hide from her attention, she came closer and reached out to him. It didn’t hurt, not physically, no. He still winced, her proximity and light touch of her fingertips the reason for it. What to do when she would notice his rapid heartbeat, so close by in his chest? And how did breathing work again, exactly? “Abalas, I didn’t mean to do that, not really.”

“I –” Words were escaping him, but at least he remembered to breathe. He inhaled to balance out the lack of air and this had been a mistake. Her hair smelled like Bodahn’s soap he also used and yet so… different. Leaning back to create space in between them again. “I guess I deserved that.”

His laugh was weak, even to his own ears. He used the distance to turn and snatch his shirt from his bed. Anything to distract him from… whatever this was. “Anyway, I meant to say that every Grey Warden I knew had their children before their Joining. So it won’t be possible for you, due to the taint.” Nor for me.

“Thank the Creators.”

Slipping the tunic over his head, he whirled around. “Err, what?”

She was unfazed about his bewilderment, because of course she was. “I can hardly remember to feed Revas on some days and kids… they are terrifying.” She shuddered, her distaste genuine. “Screaming little demons.”

“Rrrriiiight.” He should have been more surprised or even shocked about her reply, but he wasn’t. It was just so… Lenya. “Hmm, let’s see: Dying early, darkspawn nightmares, extended stamina and hunger plus infertility?” he said, using his fingers to count. “Yep, I think this is all. About the Wardens, anyhow.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

By Andraste… how should he start? Outside of Duncan, he had never told anyone. But she had a right to know. In particular after the disaster that was keeping this vital information from her concerning the Wardens. “No more secrets, right?” Alistair drove a hand through his hair and let it linger at the back of his neck. A nervous tick of him, but how could he not be anxious about that?
Lenya clicked her tongue, her annoyance understandable. “Stop stalling and out with it!”

“Maybe… you want to sit down? I know I do.” Walking over to the other side of his bed for more distance between them, he sat down and waited for her to do the same. She remained rooted in place, fixing him with a glare. Yeah, that was so not helping his nerves. Well better get it out, before she would start stabbing him. “You remember how I was upset when you asked me how I knew that my father wasn’t the one who has the darker skin?”

“Oh, so this is about you, not the Wardens?” Her posture relaxed. “We have much to discuss still, puppy. Can’t it wait?”

“Yes…err, no!” It would be easy to back out now, she gave him a wide opening for it. But he had already set his mind on telling her. “I won’t take long, or bore you with dreary details of my past, or templar training.” He raised and showed her his small finger. “Pinky promise.”

“Fine.” With a sigh, she plopped down on the ground opposite of him and crossed her legs. “I’ll listen.”

“Thank you. It means a lot to me.” He cleared his throat. “And I don’t want this to blindside you like it unfortunately did with the Warden secrets.”

“Hmhmm,” Lenya hummed, the syllables half-swallowed by an open-mouthed yawn.”’s okay.” With a muffled grunt following, she closed her eyes and stretched herself languidly. Oh. Oh, no. Please don’t. Oh, but of course she arched her back and quietly sighed, because this is what you would do when stretching your limbs, right? And – damn it, he’d lost his trail of thought. Oh, there it was, along with his face burning like fire. This was… bad. Looking away would be breast… best. Best! He slapped his forehead and pinched his nose. Ugh, what was wrong with him?

“Sorry. Long day. Obviously.”

“No, no, no. It’s not you,” he blurted upon her apology, rubbing his stubbled cheek as if this could assuage the heat within. “It’s – “me. I have lost my Maker-damned mind, is all. Any time soon he would run through Orzammar in his smalls yelling her name over and over again. Just you wait. “ – complicated.” Hah, not even a lie. “Or not.” Perhaps this was the better approach, since Maric would be a stranger to her, in name and meaning. Well, they had this in common, at least. “You remember Cailan, right?”

“The idiot king?” Lenya made a face. “Why? He is dead.”

“Yes, I’m aware, thanks.” Tact… had never been her virtue, really. “Well, that idiot… would be, or rather had been my brother. Half-brother, to be exact. Because –” Alistair pointed at his face, hoping she would catch his meaning. “ – we look differently, in a way. Also I know who my mother was and it was not the late queen.”

“Ah. Makes sense, yes,” she agreed, completely unfazed. Huh. “Was she an elf, then?”

“Yes. No! Wait, what?” Did he hear this correctly? “How do you even get to the concl– no don’t tell me.”

“Your eyes… reflect the light in the dark.” She shrugged. “Only slightly, but still.”

“Don’t all eyes do this?” Why was he even entertaining this idea? It was absurd.

“Out of us two, puppy, I’m the expert in these things. So no, they don’t. Not like that.”
“Yes, but even so… did you miss the part where I said I know who my mother was?” Alistair sighed and lowered his voice to take out the unintended annoyance within. “She was a human maid in Redcliffe. Star-struck too, given her fondness for the king. Who, again, was my father. So can we please focus on the product of this illicit affair, and what it means?”

“Whatever.” Another shrug. “What does it mean, then?”

Was she having him on or had she a very rare dense moment? Perhaps it would be better to postpone this conversation until she was less tired. Well, one more try, at least. “I’m a bastard. And before you make any smart comments, I mean the fatherless kind. I won’t bore you with more details than necessary, but King Maric, Cailan’s father, is… – was– also my father.”

“Yeah, I got this already.” Lenya gave him a pointed look. “You are a human prince, big deal. Perhaps you have forgotten that we Dalish don’t have kings, or queens. Blah, I couldn’t care less. It doesn’t change anything for me.”

“Oh.” He was dumbstruck. Her unpredictability had once more reared its head and left him utterly lost for… anything, really. “I only thought you should know, because all my life people have treated me differently due to it. I… never belonged.”

“I see.” Lenya sucked in air through her teeth, her cool facade crumbling. She shook her head and once she stopped, it was back in place. “Explains your adoration for the Wardens, then.”

How… how could this woman dissect him with so little effort and words? It was fascinating and terrifying alike. He was cut wide open by her wit, laid bare. And now, his heart refused to calm down, raced like right after the workout earlier. Oh, this was trouble. “I guess?” Alistair chuckled softly, shrugged with one shoulder. “Besides, this is something that could come up later and, well, I didn’t want you to hear about my parentage from someone else. Not again, like with, well -”

“You are a quick learner from your mistakes. I appreciate that.” She tilted her head, her gaze seizing him once more. “But why would it matter? Are you going to be the new king now?”

“No. No, no nononono! Absolutely not!” By Andraste’s bottom, she could not spring that onto him. Wasn’t his poor, confused heart already suffering enough? “Maker's breath, just hearing that gives me a heart attack! I'm a commoner and inconvenient bastard son, so it was always made clear to me that the throne is in no way in my future.” Ugh, this was exactly why he never talked about it otherwise. “And I’m fine with that, since I even have trouble to find my second boot on some days. How would I ever – no!”

“Ah yes, your adversity to leading.” The corner of her lip raised slightly to a hint of a smile. “It makes all sense now.”

And she did it again. Just like that his parentage, the secrecy of it, and being a possible threat to Cailan's rule was reduced to a common denominator. Unbelievable. Hiding his face behind his hand, Alistair laughed out loud this time.

“That’s okay, though,” she stated with a nod. “You were right… I don’t like following. Or rules, when they make no sense to me.” Right, this was a big part for and of her. Rationality and the logic of things. The need to perceive and understand the world around her stood in stark contrast with her obdurate, hostile attitude. “Still you are a Warden longer than me, so by the Creators if you don’t help or cooperate with this insane task, I’ll –“

“O-of course,” he rushed to say, cutting into her threat of possibly unspeakable violence. Maker knew this woman packed a punch, especially for someone so small in height. Compared to him,
anyway. “If you let me, I’ll stand by you until the end! That is a given, Lenya.”

“Hmpf, you better be doing this, human,” she grumped, stretching out her legs and wiggled her toes. Wait, why wasn’t she wearing any shoes? “Because I refuse to spend twelve years of my shortened life for this shit, or with you for that matter!” Ouch, while not surprising, that bit did hurt. “So we best end it all much more quickly. Or are ended more quickly. Whichever is first.”

“Right.” Her bluntness never failed to hit him across his face like a slap. “What is up with your fixation on that number, by the way? You keep mentioning it and –“

Her long-suffering sigh interrupted his sentence. It was the kind when one was tired to point out the obvious. “The duration of the last Blight, of course.”

Ah. “I read about it in my studies, after my Joining.” Not in detail, because he’d not been dealing well with the newly acquired nightmares at the time. She didn’t need to know that, though. “The current Blight has not spread yet to other nations in Thedas, so there is a real chance we are going to be able to nip it in its bud. And much quicker than in twelve years.”

“Not if you keep talking so much, no.”

“Oh ho ho, very funny. You see, one has to do that, when needing to bare all of your secrets, like the Lady Warden demanded it from you.” Ah, the scowl this earned him was as amusing as it was typical. “Don’t worry, we can move on from it now, and I’ll just pretend you still think I’m some... nobody who was too lucky to die with the rest of the Grey Wardens.”

“Oh? As said I don’t care about human kings or queens or whatever. Nothing has changed.” She paused for a moment, thinking. “But I survived too, so what does that make me, then?”

“The reason why I say I was lucky.” Oh. Oh no. He said that out loud, or? Her ensuing gasp told him that he did. Crap, he was so dead. Yes, it was the truth, although verbalizing this was a bad, bad idea. Alistair’s whimper cut into the awkward silence stretching between them. He flailed with both, his hands and mind, trying to find a way to break through the sudden discomfort. He should explain what he meant, yes. “It is simply that... without you we wouldn't have come so far. Because I would have to be leading then and everyone would end up running in circles… in their smalls.” Alistair’s eyes widened. Oh no, he made it worse. “I mean –“ Another whimper. Great.

Lenya’s eyebrow arched up high, scrunching some of the lines of her forehead tattoo. “In their smalls?” A hint of a smile splayed across her lips. “Do I even want to know?”

“No, you really don’t.” He stopped his hand short from driving through his hair again and scratched at his nose instead. “It would simply not end well, is what I’m saying. I’m no leader. In fact, I’m not much of anything.”

The amusement had vanished as quickly as it had appeared. No scowl replaced it, though. Her expression stayed open, even as she shook her head. “Stop putting yourself down, Alistair. It’s annoying how you keep doing that.”

He scoffed. Easier said than done. “I have been kept a secret, packed out of the way, as to not to be a threat to Cailan's rule. So no one even knows I exist. Which, again, fine. I don’t want any of it.” Alistair drew his lower lip in between his teeth. His jaw tensed along with his shoulders as frustration mounted inside. “Yet, once people found out, they treated me differently. They either coddled or resented me for it. Even… Duncan kept me out of battle, once he knew.”

“That’s… not fair.” Lenya sat a bit more upright, her hands still folded in her lap. “You had not
chosen to be born as the king’s child. Nor had I chosen to be the Keeper's daughter.”

Wait, what? “Oh?” The delight about this piece of information let him relax again, if only a little. “You are a Dalish princess, then?”

She trained her gaze down at her hand, now balled to a fist, with the exception of one sharp look toward him. “You… do like your teeth were they are, right?”

“You would do violence? Upon me?” Alistair gasped out loud and clutched his cheeks with both of his hands to add to the comedic effect. “I am shocked and dismayed, my dear fellow Warden.”

Her annoyance upon his humor was expected, even wished, in parts. It was nice to get a raise out of her, with her reacting as expected. Grounding, in a way. Besides, as subtle as she was with her expressions, there was a hint of amusement in between the sigh and eye roll. To have that elicited out of her… that was nice too. “Can we focus back on discussing what I came for? We already wasted enough time!”

“What?” His laugh was easy and relaxed, like his posture. Teasing her was so much fun, if a dangerous gamble. Like poking a bear. But what was life without a bit of danger? “I bare my inner secrets to you and I get nary a sentence about your past in return, before it is all back to business?”

Lenya rubbed her left eyebrow with her index and middle-finger. A vexed gesture she did when her already thin patience was running out. “I never asked for this kind of information, puppy.”

“Yes, I know,” he said, adapting to her mood with a much more calm tone. “But you asked about if there are any secrets left and this is a pretty big one, after all. You deserved to know.”

She paused, deliberated on his words. “Okay. Now I know. Thank you.” Picking the folded letter back up from the ground, she waved it in his line of vision. “There are more important things than that to talk about, though.”

“Hmm,” he hummed, smiling a bit. It wasn’t important to her. In fact, she barely cared about his royal parentage. This was… a new experience for him, refreshing in all the good ways. “Fine. Keep your secrets. I will get them out of you, yet.”

Lenya jumped to her feet in one fluent movement. Fluent was also the curse under her breath, before his name resounded sharply through the room. “Alistair!”

A shiver ran down his spine, yet fear wasn’t its reason. More like it was due to how she’d honed his name to a weapon against him. It was nice when she said it, far more than that. Oh. Damn. Shaking his head slightly, he stood up from the bed and walked over to the desk, where she had sat down. His heart beat faster the closer he got to her. Yep, no point in denying it, he was in big, big trouble. Inhaling deeply to calm down, Alistair grabbed a stool and sat down next to her. “Right, back to business, then.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading. Consider leaving feedback in form of kudos and/or a comment perhaps? It would be most appreciated.

Change Notes:
This chapter is borne out of the changes made in the prior ones and as such completely new written. Alistair is aware of crushing on Lenya, simply because he is a clever guy and i couldn't postpone the realization of it any further. He still thinks it will pass tho, hahaha. The talk between them was a needed one as well, given how they parted the last time. And yeah, the royal parentage thing. Muuuuuch earlier here too than in my old version as well. Ngl, Alistair was very pushy here and wanted to tell Lenya about it, despite my other plans with this chapter xD Oh well, in this way all cards are on the table and it makes it possible for me to rewrite the Redcliffe bit too, since i was never satisfied with how it went, in hindsight.
Leliana had just finished her breakfast, when it knocked at her door. Wiping the crumbs off her mouth and hands, she swallowed the last bit of her food and got up.

“Are you up?” the person asked through the closed door, waiting. Ah, Alistair. What did he want this early after the morning bell? Sure he was an early riser, like herself but – “Um, okay, I come back later, then.”

Leliana hurried to open the door. “Wait, I am up. What is the matter, Alistair?”

“Ah. Good morning.” He turned back around to her with a nervous half smile. Unusual to see him without his armor and in civil clothing only. He was armed however, carried his sword sheathed at his belt on the side, along with a small drawstring bag. Not a surprise for a warrior like him to carry arms, she did too when going outside. A more or less hidden dagger could decide over life or death in a dire situation. Even in an apparent safe place like Orzammar. Alistair flicked an envelope in his right hand against the other. A letter? What for? “Can I come in?”

“Certainly.” She moved aside to make room for him to enter and closed the door behind him.

“I apologize for barging in here so early.” He stopped to exhale and glanced about in her room. “I thought it is best if we talk about it, as soon as possible.”

She frowned. “About what?”

“Yes, well...” Swallowing audibly, he geared toward a chair to sit down. “May I?”

“Of course.” Shaking her head, she followed suit and sat back down on her bed. “I don’t like this, Alistair. You are making me nervous with your –“

“Oh, sorry. Not my intention, really.” He inhaled sharply. “You have heard that Lenya returned, I suppose?”

Sitting more upright, Leliana crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap. “Yes, through the rashvine.” No one bothered to inform her personally about the current state of things and it stung. Was this the reason he was here, however belatedly? “The servants are all abuzz this morning
about how the Wardens are going to find Branka for Harrowmont, too. Did I miss something?”

Alistair coughed in his hand, still holding the letter in his other. The envelope was sealed with a pale wax stamp that resembled the griffon on his armor. Official correspondence then? Dread bloomed in the pits of her stomach. Why? And what had it to do with herself? She was no Warden. “Well, yeah. I talked to Lenya at length yesterday, in the evening. About any lingering issues and matters she needed to know regarding the Wardens – ‘He cut himself off, didn’t finish his sentence. “…And about how to proceed further, now where the journey to the Deep Roads is inevitable to get our dwarven treaty honored.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. These words weren’t the ones he initially wanted to say, though. Well, best not to linger on it, for now. “It is certain? Since when?”

“Since Lenya went on her own to Harrowmont and told him that. You know how she is.” Yes, indeed. Unpredictable. Cool. Vindictive. Judgmental. There was more to her, of course. Various nuances of softness and vulnerability, she hid behind layers of callousness. A valid method she had used many times before herself, to keep others at arms length. This was however, where their similarities ended. “In order to be able to prepare accordingly, we will be leaving for the Deep Roads in a week.”

“That’s good.” She gave him a look. “That’s not why you are here, no?”

“Not entirely, no,” he confessed with a sigh. “I wanted to keep you in the loop, of course. And we will be meeting up at the Tapster later with everyone to discuss our plans in detail.”

“But?” she probed. Maker, could he speak more quickly? This artificial tension he created with his pauses and sighs in between kept her at the edge of her seat. “Out with it.”

“But you won’t go with us, then. Into the Deep Roads, I mean.”

“What?” The dread that had accumulated in her stomach spread to every limb and fiber of her body. Her head swam with its force. Leliana dug her fingers into the mattress beneath her to ground herself. A shaky exhale followed. “I will be left behind?”

“For a good reason,” he amended, his free hand raised in defense. “This is why I’m here. So you hear it from me in person, instead of during the group meeting.”

Yes, Lenya and her had their differences and she’d said some stupid things to her she couldn’t take back, regrettably. To let this animosity influence Lenya’s judgment and have Alistair, of all people, agreeing, did hurt. As if her heart was squeezed in her chest, making breathing difficult. “I’m — “ Her voice cracked and her mouth plopped shut. … no longer wished? Leliana averted her eyes, fixed the shadow Alistair’s broad form cast at the room’s wall. There was a carving there, large runes which meaning escaped her.

“No. Please let me explain.” Old insecurities and doubts battled for her attention in her mind. This… vision of hers, had it even been real? Perhaps she should have never left Lothering, with her help there more people could have escaped. Too late. Too late for all of it. Her home was gone now, taken by the darkspawn and Blight. This was why she wanted to help them, elsewhere, on a greater scale. Yes, deep in her heart she believed it was the Maker showing her the way to a bigger destiny. She had to, because the alternative was worse and — no. Maker guide her through this anew trial, what should she do instead? Was nothing ever good enough to atone for her past mistakes? “It has nothing to do with Lenya disliking you, or anything.”

“Oh?” This made her resurface from a litany of self-doubts. “What is it, then?”
“Pragmatism.” His eyebrow raised a bit. “If you really have been an orlesian spy prior to Lothering, you should know by now that Lenya follows the rules of logic.” He huffed out a laugh. “Except when she doesn’t, of course.”

“She is…” Leliana halted in search of the right word, glanced up to him. “… hard to read. You seem to have less trouble doing so, however.”

Alistair shifted in his seat, cleared his throat. The light was too dim to see the dust of pink within his brown cheeks, yet it being there was a near certainty. It always was when he talked about Lenya and his bond to her that went beyond being simply his fellow Warden. “Is it about that letter you are holding?” she asked to redirect him back to the topic.

“Yes,” he breathed, drawing the word out to a hiss. “Lenya and I, well, we are both venturing into the Deep Roads for weeks, possible months. I do not have to explain to you why the place isn’t the most hospitable in Thedas, I hope?” Leliana only shook her head. Best not to break his momentum now. “Good. You would be our fail-safe, in case…” He swallowed. “We don’t make it out alive there.” Alistair stood up, handed her the letter. “This letter, well –” Alistair’s mouth plopped shut, while he converted the nervous energy into walking up and down in the room. “We are the last Wardens in Ferelden and if we fall, someone has to notify the Wardens in other countries. And Orlais is closest from Orzammar.”

Ah. Leliana thumbed the envelope, carefully brushed over the indents of its wax seal. That explains it then. It was clever, with a logic removed from all sentiments. “This someone is me.”

He stopped to look at her. “Obviously, we need someone for this who knows their way around there and you have lived in Orlais for a long time, right?”

“Oui, c'est possible que je connaisse un peu la vie au Orlais,” she said, a smile tugging at her lips. It was easy to slip back into this familiar language, her lilt even stronger here than with the common tongue.

“See, this is why Lenya chose you.” Adapting to her shift in mood, Alistair relaxed as well and sat back down. “Also Revas will keep you company until we, hopefully, return with that paragon and you can forget about this letter again.”

“Oh?” It made a lot of sense with that reasoning to be left behind, no matter how much it still bothered her. But the mabari? Why wouldn't Lenya want to take him with her? “Why Revas?”

“Lenya does not want him to get hurt. Besides, we would need extra rations of food specifically for him. More stuff to carry, etcetera etcetera.”

“I see.” Leliana squared her shoulders and raised her chin. “And who says that the day after you all did leave, I will not vanish to Orlais with all your remaining possessions and money?”

“Robbing us?” He blinked slowly and deliberately, while looking at her. “Of course there will be no one there stopping you from doing so. And Revas could be persuaded with enough snacks.” Pausing for effect, he exhaled and shook his head. “But you are not that kind of person. I know that and trust you to do the right thing. And, her own dislike for you aside, Lenya does too. Or else she wouldn’t have come up with this idea in the first place.”

Leliana gave him a dubious look in return. “Yep, all Lenya,” he said, chuckling. “I’m just the messenger. The bearer of bad news and witty one-liner, as usual.”

She leaned forward, played along. “Really, now? Lenya did all that?”
“Hmmhm,” he hummed. “You should have seen it. She even had a map in the end, was drawing routes and calculating travel times with it. It was very thorough.”

With him, it was sometimes hard to distinguish what was his humor and what not. Here, his tone gave away the difference, however slightly. “You sound… surprised.”

“Amazed, more like.” Alistair huffed out a laugh. “For someone so averse to leading and the very idea of going into the Deep Roads before… she adapted very fast to it, to any of it. Not sure if this is a Dalish thing or simply a Lenya thing, but yeah…” His sentence trailed off into a breathless sigh, his expression made brighter by thoughts of her, his fellow Warden. The adoration found within was as innocent as it was adorable. “What?” Alistair wiped at his nose, suddenly self-conscious. “Is there something in my face?”

Leliana shrugged with one shoulder, amused. “No.” Tempting, but she had promised to stop teasing him about it. Besides, it always led to him being defensive and denying it. It was not her place to push him into the recognition of his attraction for his fellow Warden. He had to notice it for himself.

“Nooo?” He drawled out the word, slanted his head. “No teasing about how I like her and how I am attracted to her? Not even a little?”

“Do you want me to?”

He mirrored her one-sided shrug. “You were right with it, after all. I do like her.” What now? All the stammering, blushing and denial before and now he confessed it outright? That was unexpected. “Believe me, the irony of it is not lost on me.”

Better to leave it at that, it wasn’t important in the grand scale of matters. Especially when she was still lacking some crucial information about her task entrusted to her by the Wardens. “When should I leave for Orlais? I’m certain there is a certain time frame planned for the journey and once it is –”

“Of course there is,” Alistair cut in with haste, a bit breathless. Perhaps he was embarrassed to have forgotten to mention such a major detail. “Let’s see. We calculated that the journey to Caridin’s Cross would take two to three weeks. Back and forth, these are six weeks.” he said, counting on his fingers like a boy. As active he was, this was more out of his urge to move and enhance his words than necessity. “Plus the allotted time needed to travel further into the Deep Roads: Two weeks. Counting that back and forth, it makes about ten weeks in total.”

She gasped out. That long? “Nearly three months?”

“Ideally a lot shorter, but yes,” Alistair said, grimacing. “So if we aren’t back in three months, well, you should pack up and travel toward Montsimmard. You will find the Wardens’ headquarters there.”

“Understood,” Leliana nodded in spite of the pang of discomfort the thought caused inside. Then, another one hit her. “It will be winter, when you return from the Deep Roads. We aren’t equipped for Ferelden’s harsh winter.”

“If we return, we can deal with that problem later on.” He huffed out a laugh.”Don’t give me that look, Leliana. I surely don’t plan to roll over and die down there. It is simply a measurement for the worst case scenario. One I wouldn’t have without Lenya, at that.”

“I see.” Leliana got up and walked over to the sideboard at the wall opposite of her bed. Taking the
water pitcher from the tablet placed upon, she filled up a cup for herself and turned around. “Can I offer you a bit of water, Alistair? All that talking made me thirsty.”

“Yes, please,” he replied, swallowing audibly. “I feel rather parched, to be honest.”

She had filled up a second cup for him, when the irony of the situation hit her. Back then, in her other life, this was the point where she would poison the other person to eliminate her target without the needs of seduction. Of course she planned no such things with Alistair, someone she was already willing to call her friend. And this also would be very counterproductive to her path of redemption found within the Maker’s light. Still, she would have to educate him on the danger of accepting drinks from another person; especially strangers. With Loghain sending bounty hunters after the Wardens and his many crazed supporters like the man in front of Orzammar’s gate, it would be a needed one.

“Here.” Leliana handed him the filled cup.

He took it and eyed it for a bit. “No poison in there, I hope?”

Well, joke or not, Alistair was a quick learner, at least. She switched their cups and drank from it with big gulps, then put it down on the table behind him. “You caught me and my clever plans of poisoning one of the last Wardens and chance Ferelden has to not be swallowed up by the Blight.”

It had been a jest, though had not translated to him as such. “Alright, calm down.” Alistair quickly emptied his own cup and set it aside. “I will tell you a secret to appease you for my joke gone wrong.” His lips twitched up to a lopsided grin. “I rewrote that letter and sealed it up anew, once Lenya was gone. Because this is the original one, written by her.”

Taking the folded piece of parchment handed to her, Leliana sat down to read. Lenya’s handwriting was scrawly and scratchy, with too much pressure used on the paper in places. Several dots of ink were splattered across the letter as well.

"Honored Wardens of Orlais,

Where are you a so-called? Could use some help here.

If this letter arrives you, well done. You got what you wanted. The Blight is all yours, your problem. Since due to sitting on your ass doing nothing your unwillingness to send in two last living Wardens of Ferelden, any kind of aid, we have perished. Hope you are p

yourselves. Enjoy the Blight and all it entails assholes.

With all due respect,

(former, now deceased) Warden of Ferelden,

Lenya Marnefell"

"Oh … my,” was all she could say, before bursting into a fit of laughter. Alistair’s warm chuckle resounded through the room as he laughed along.
“Yeah, needless to say tact and diplomacy isn’t Lenya’s forte,” he said in between a large intake of air, still grinning. “I should have thrown it away or even burned it, but I couldn’t. It is simply so… her.”

Indeed. It would make a nice memory to laugh about, years later. If they all would live to tell the tale, of course. Quieting down, she gave him a knowing look. “Shall I keep it safe for you?”

“What?” he asked in mock-offense, clapping at his chest. “So you can read it at our wedding?”

“… Maybe?” Leliana admitted, showing him her best coy smile. It wasn’t as outlandish as he thought it to be. A lot of co-workers had turned into lovers in time and that even under less dire circumstances than they found themselves in.

“Yeah, of course you like that line of thought.” Alistair sighed, rolling his eyes. “The bastard Warden and the Dalish Princess, being the star-crossed lovers. Sure, sure. Start taking notes for your epic ballad.”

“Bastard?”

“Longer story, another time. After my return, perhaps?” he offered, leaning back in his chair. “Also, if you like to live, never ever call Lenya that to her face. She will skin you alive and feed you to Revas.”

“What is it about that title anyway?”

“Not my place to tell, honestly,” he said with a shrug. “Let’s just say it is one of the rare pieces of information Lenya has divulged about herself.”

“Well, but the mystery makes her even more interesting, no?”

“Ah, idle gossip and assumptions, thou are thy name.” The quip came almost immediately, though he still averted his eyes and coughed awkwardly into his hand. “How quaint.”

Good to know she wasn’t as rusty in reading people as feared. Although Alistair wasn’t truly a challenge in this regard. “Nothing wrong with having a type, mon ami. Lenya’s confidence, shrewdness and fighting prowess are alluring traits, after all. And she is easy on the eyes too, no?”

“Sounds like you want to woo her instead,” he scoffed, giving her a stink eye. Perhaps she had been a bit too forward here. “Not that I would have any idea of it, anyhow.” Ah, that was the issue, then?

“Give it time and be yourself, Alistair,” she said, smiling at him. He was a good, honest guy and Lenya more open around him. If their relationship would be given enough room to breathe and bloom, it turning into love wasn’t as absurd as he flippantly described it. “You do know how to do that, don’t you?”

“Thanks, but I didn’t ask for your advice and I’m done talking about it, Leliana. Nothing will come out of this… stupid —” Gesturing wildly, he gave up to find a fitting word, maybe didn’t want to label it. “…whatever it is, anyway. The Blight and everything else are far more important than that.” Alistair sprang up from his seat, suddenly eager to leave. “I will see you at Tapsters after the midday bell?”

“O-of course. I’m sorry if I overstepped your boundaries and offend —“

“N-no, not at all,” he hurried to say, cutting into her words. “It’s simply a moot point. I’m a Grey
Warden and have to focus on that duty, and nothing beyond it. I owe it to…” His expression grew pained. “…everyone else.”

“I... understand. See you later, then.” Alistair nodded, then left quickly without any further word. He hadn’t even reclaimed Lenya’s letter.

Their preparations were almost complete, all plans laid out and discussed. In two days they would finally leave for the Deep Roads. Not a prospect to look forward to, but at least it would be quieter down there. Far less people than here were too, so the trade-off with darkspawn hordes would be worth it. Probably. Another merchant close by yelled far too loud to praise his wares, and a dwarven noble in hurry and with a death wish bumped into Morrigan. The idiot mumbled an apology without looking up and went their way. What was with all these people? Why was approximately half of Orzammar present in the marketplace today? Ugh.

“Must we linger here, Lenya?”

The Warden gave her a quick look, before focusing back on the display of knives in front of her. “Don’t you have enough knives already?” Morrigan tried anew, arms crossed.

She picked up a medium-sized blade with a long handle and flicked it around in her hands, then up in the air. The moronic shop keeper let out a gasp, muttered something of ‘to not cut herself’ while the knife safely landed in her hands again, handle first. Morrigan rolled her eyes. What a show-off. “There is no such thing as ‘too many knives,’ actually. It is best to be prepared for everything in the Deep Roads.” Lenya sheathed the blade again and handed it the merchant. “I take it, plus a dozen of the throwing knives you got back there.”

“The Deep Roads?” the merchant shrieked as recognition belatedly struck him. “You’re the Grey Warden.”

Her eyes flinted at the fool. “Your ability to differentiate between the two elves present in whole of Orzammar is remarkable, old man.”

“A bit cranky today, aren’t we, Morrigan?”

“I’m not cranky. I’m justifiable vexed in regard of the volume and amount of people here.”

“Paint it white and call it a halla if you like,” Lenya replied with a shrug. “Besides you wanted to accompany me to the marketplace for stocking up on ingredients needed for your potions.”

“Our potions, Warden!” she bit back, far harsher than intended. “Tis nigh impossible to find anything here in the turmoil, least of all herbs.”

“Herbs, you are seeking?” the merchant asked, stroking his beard. “Old Hilda has a stand where she sells all kind of imported surface greens down the street, past the tavern.” He turned back to Lenya. “If you need something to throw at the blighters down there, I can recommend these flasks of acid and fire bombs to you.”

That idiot could have led with that information instead of having her stand there! Morrigan spun on her heels with a huff, and stalked toward the direction pointed out to her. Time to get that errant done, so they could leave it all behind and return to the mansion.
Passing the tavern, a dwarf standing in front of it called after her. “Hey! Hey you, witchtits. Tehehe. You are with the Warden, right?”

Morrigan froze and turned into his direction with a slowness that belied her fury underneath. Step by step she closed the distance between the red-haired dwarf and herself. The closer she came the more burned the stench of alcohol and stale sweat in her nose. Ugh. Killing him would be a public service for all of Orzammar. “What did you call me, you disgusting filth of a dwarf?”

The lips beneath his braided, filthy beard twitched up in a triumphal grin. “Got your attention with it, haven’t I?”

She backed away from him, his odor too strong and nauseating. “If tis your goal to be flung into the lava vent close by, then yes.”

“Tehehe, would love to see your scrawny ass try.” The filth was unperturbed by her threat and pulled a swig out of his flagon. “Seen you prancing around with the Warden, though. Can’t remember if it was he… or she – you understand this was many mugs ago –“

“Stop wasting my time, filth!”

“Ah, to the point.” The drunk filth leered at her. Morrigan’s fingers twitched with the urge to turn him into a pile of ash. “A woman after my own heart. Was about to say that I’ve been privy to the rumor that the Warden was searching for Branka on Lord Harrowmont’s own command.”

“That’s none of your business. Now begone!”

“Nah, not moving. I stood here first, witchy. My spot.” Fair enough, twas not as if she would care to linger here anyhow. “Wait!” he called after her, making her stop in her tracks. “I know what Branka wanted and what she looked like. You and yer Warden I assume, know whatever Harrowmont's men have dug up on where exactly she disappeared.” Pausing, he drunk another sip from his flask. “Soooo, if we pool our knowledge, we stand a chance of finding Branka. Otherwise, good sodding luck.”

Come to think about it… a few days ago at their meeting, the fool of a Warden babbled something of a red-headed dwarf who knew where Branka was. How he was her husband wanting to bring her back. Blah, blah, blah. This, this was him? Really? ‘Twas more likely for this Warden idiot to have a coherent, intelligent thought and for Revas to start talking in common tongue than this drunken filth to be able leading them anywhere near their goal. “Ya know I’m right, or else you wouldn’t have stopped.” Ugh. Twould take so little to make him shut up eternally. Why the hesitance, then?

Morrigan whirled round to him, yet did not close the distance already created between them. The farther she was away from him and his stench, the better. “You keep saying that, and yet here you stand. In front of the tavern, doing nothing but drinking and pestering society with your reek and pathetic presence.” Lips pursed to a sneer, she scoffed and laid all her disgust into the following words. “‘Tis no wonder your wife escaped into the Deep Roads, preferring the darkspawn’s company to yours! Anyone with half a brain would.”

Stumbling more than walking, he charged forward, shaking his fists into her face.”Say this again and I-I will –“

“You will what? Offend me with your vile odor until I pass out?” Staring down at his impotent rage in a glare, Morrigan let out a sharp laugh. What a wretched, disgusting creature he was. “You don’t even possess a weapon, dwarf!” She flicked her fingers, calling forth a flame engulfing her palm. “I… on the other hand… –“
“Bah.” With this single word, he backed down, returned to his corner and his drink. “Sodding mages and their sodding magic, always think they are so special,” the dwarf mumbled under his breath and spat on the ground, before turning back around to her. “Listen witch, I damn well know I shouldn’t be your first pick for a dance partner at whatever highness’s inaugural ball, but for finding Branka, I’m the best bet you and your Warden friend will have. Think about it!”

“Hmm, already done.” Morrigan let the flame in her hands die and turned around to leave. “I’d rather take a swim in lava.”

Having bought all required ingredients, Morrigan returned to the market place in the front of the common area. Lenya was still there, idly looking through the wares of another stall, while some elder dwarven woman talked to her. What was that about? She approached to listen in. Filda, how the woman introduced herself, wanted Lenya’s help to find her son in the Deep Roads. Such a fool’s errand and hope. If he vanished there, he was long dead, of course. To believe otherwise was delusion, something this woman obviously suffered from.

Losing interest in their conversation, Morrigan let her gaze wander over the wares displayed in front of her. Most of it were cheap trinkets and useless bauble for sentimental idiots such as Alistair. However, one item was unusual, stood out from the rest. A golden hand mirror. Her breath caught in her throat, her fingers twitching to touch it. Impossible, this couldn’t be the mirror she had, back then. Yet with its fine polished glass, enclosed in a golden frame it was eerily similar to it. Given in to her impulse to touch it, Morrigan picked up the mirror and turned it over. An elaborate picture of a golden deer and several sparrows were carved into its back. “Remarkable, isn’t it?” The merchant had a scratchy voice, though any further words of him were lost on her. The mirror reflected her picture back to her and it was one of disbelief. The surface was smooth, where cracks should be. Foolish. It wasn’t the same mirror, couldn’t be. There was another voice and it called her name, slowly piercing through the fog clouding her mind.

“Morrigan!” She glanced up and Lenya stood in front of herself. When did she – “Are you alright? It is untypical of you to space out like that.”

“O-of course!” She put the mirror down in a rush, back with the other bauble where it belonged. Better to forget about it. “What did that woman want from you?” Morrigan asked to divert the attention from herself.

“That?” The Warden’s stance relaxed and she rolled her eyes. “Finding her son named Ruck in the Deep Roads. As if that one wild halla chase after the Paragon wasn’t already enough. So I declined.”

“How reasonable of you. She is deluded if she thinks her son is still alive. No one survives so long, especially if tainted.

“Yeah,” Lenya breathed, looking away. Her posture deflated even further and within her expression flashed a glimpse of pain. “As much I can understand her hope to find otherwise, her wish for closure… there is no time for it.” She shook her head with sigh. “Anyway, you got everything you need?”

Morrigan peered at the mirror beside her, before she caught herself doing so and trained her gaze back on the Dalish. “Y-yes, let’s head back. I’m weary of all the people here.” Lenya’s eyes
narrowed a bit, but wordlessly turned to leave.

The logistics of the anti-corruption potions were annoying, if necessary. Especially for a place such as the Deep Roads. Minus the two Wardens and Shale, who were immune by default, Morrigan needed potions for the Qunari, that annoying circle mage and herself, of course. Though that elf could do them for himself, she would not put any kind of work into something he could do instead. Squinting at the recipe spread out in front of her and the assorted herbs needed, she started to mix the last batch. It said to administer the potion every two to three days in order to keep its effects intact. Though given the high concentration of taint to find in the Deep Roads, ‘twas better to be safe than sorry. There was no coming back, once tainted.

She needed to focus for the next part to magically – “Morrigan!” She startled at the sudden voice and only due her reflexes none of the vials shattered on the ground.

“Lenya, your interest in my company is flattering, but is it asked too much for you to knock?” Morrigan clicked her tongue, her eyes still fixed on the concoction in front of her. “’Tis customary to do so before entering a room.”

“Eh,” she made, the shrug following already implied in her tone. “Not many doors there where I come from. Didn’t know that Asha'belannar was keen on teaching customs, though.”

Morrigan held up a hand, motioned her to be silent. Magical distillation needed to be done in the right concentration or else the potion would be too weak, or too strong. A drop of lyrium should be enough as enhancer. While calling on the Fade, Lenya closed the door and plopped down to her on the ground like the uninvited guest she was.

A moment later it was done and the potion-to-be lily-white in color in its vessel, like the flower it contained. Ready to be filled up into the vials for later usage. “If you insist on staying, make yourself useful,” Morrigan said and handed Lenya a handful of empty ones. After carefully setting aside the item she held, they worked in comfortable silence on the task.

“Here,” Lenya said, giving the filled vials back to her. “Good to see that flatear came through with his promise.”

Morrigan put them back to the others and shoved all corked vials to the side. Better to pack them away safely when she was gone. “Pity he uses as many words as your fool of a fellow Warden.”

She snorted. “He is not my fool, by any means. I understand what you mean, though. What is it with people needing to fill the air with useless words?”

“Indeed.” Morrigan shook her head and huffed. Twas a relief that someone understood her confusion and aversion to most of the people outside the Wilds. “There are things about human society which have always puzzled me. Such as the touching – why all the touching for a simple greeting?”

“You mean shaking hands?” She nodded at her. “I have only seen it done at the last Arlathvhen, when kin from other clans arrived. It is a gesture of respect toward the other person.”

“But why is the touching my hand needed for it? I find it an offensive intrusion.”
“Just because I know of the gesture’s relevance doesn’t mean I like it!” Lenya mirrored her disgust in her own expression. “Especially not with strangers. I do not want strangers to touch me, hands or otherwise.”

“Sensible.” Repositioning herself on the ground, she crossed her legs. Twas much more comfortable to sit this way and offered enough space between the Warden and herself. “There were many nuances that Flemeth could never tell me of. When to look into another’s eyes, how to eat at a table, how to bargain without offending... none of these things I knew.” She took a cloth rag from the side. Better to wipe away the spillage of the potion... – only there were none. Lenya had worked cleanly, with a steady hand. Impressive. Perhaps all of it was a sum of the reasons why she was more at ease with talking to her. The Dalish was not only surprisingly tolerable so far, but also as foreign as herself to the outside world.

“I still do not understand it all, truth be told,” she continued, peering down at the rag in her hands. “But, then, I gave up long ago any hope of doing so. When I returned to the Wilds last, I swore to Flemeth that I had no intention of leaving again.”

“Yet here you are.” Her smile was not one of jest or derision, but warm and friendly. “I’m glad.”

What was that supposed to mean? Morrigan’s eyes narrowed, suspicion furling in her guts. Her presence was useful to the Wardens due to the magic, yet Lenya’s words hinted at more than mere beneficial companionship. Why was that? “Here,” the Warden said, handing her the object she’d prior set down to help her with the vials. It was wrapped in an old linen cloth. “This is the reason why I bothered you again.”

Heavy in her hands, Morrigan took and unwrapped it. Her breath caught in her throat. It was the golden mirror from the merchant’s stall! What? How? “I don’t understand...” she managed, her own voice weak and barely above a whisper. She couldn’t have known about it, nor what it meant to her.

“I have seen you looking at it earlier. You liked it, don’t you?” Lenya heaved her shoulders to a shrug. “With every preparation done for the Deep Roads, I was idle. So I went back to the market and bought it for you.”

Instinctively, Morrigan hugged the mirror to her chest, just like she did as a girl, back then. Startled by her own reaction, she quickly put it back down, frowning. What was she doing? She was not a sentimental idiot such as others in their party. “Why? Why are you giving me this?”

“Do I need a reason?”

“Yes!” she draw out the word to a hiss, her eyes hardening. “No one offers another a gift without a price attached to it. Ever.”

“That sounds incredibly cynic and depressing.” Lenya tilted her head, her eyes trained on her. “Is this what Asha’belannar taught you?”

“Yes. However –“

“Wow, what a shitty parent! Sure, my mother disappeared into the night after giving birth to me, but –“

“Flemeth taught me everything I needed to learn!” Morrigan protested, reciprocated the Warden's interruption with her own. “Beauty and love are fleeting and have no meaning. Survival has meaning. Power has meaning. If other mothers do not teach these things, then I believe them the
lesser.”

Lenya rubbed her tattooed forehead with sigh. “I don’t argue these things don’t have value, on the greater scale of things. My clan’s survival always came first, no matter how hard the winter, or how scarce the game. But now… they are gone. I’m gone from them, thrown into this madness.” She rolled her eyes, but the sadness within lingered. “All I have left is my own survival now.”

“And tis worth nothing to you?” Unbelievable, to have thought they were alike.

“Of course it is! I owe it to –” As quickly as her indignation came, it deflated once more in despondence. “It is –was– not only survival and hardship. There was laughter too, freedom and... friendship.” Lenya’s gaze shifted into a glare upon her, even as she swallowed audibly. “You know what, it doesn’t matter. It is just a gift, Morrigan. Take it or leave it, but I don’t expect anything in return.” With a huff, the Dalish jumped back to her feet. “I simply thought it would be a nice thing to do, after noticing your interest for it. A thanks for the diligence you put into our preparations for the Deep Roads; the potions and all. How stupid of me.”

“Can’t you understand my confusion?” Morrigan’s gripped the mirror’s handle harder, yet forced her hand to remain still. This time it would not shatter on the ground. She wouldn't allow it. “I never have been given a gift before!”

“Yes, well…” Spinning on her heels, Lenya steered towards the door. “There is always a first time for everything.” She opened it, though paused within its frame without looking at her. “I’ll see you then tomorrow. Or not. Good night, Morrigan.”

Morrigan was left with a gnawing sensation of wrongness in her guts, even long after the door had closed behind the Dalish.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading my story/chapter update. Do consider to leave me a kudos and/or comment, maybe? It would be most appreciated <3

Change Notes:

I kept the element of Leliana staying behind with the task to bring a letter to Orlais' Wardens, should they fail in the DR. It will have relevance later on, too. Others than that, it is newly written chapter, tying up remaining loose ends with the focus on the relationships between Leliana/Alistair and Morrigan/Lenya. I felt that it would be best to rewrite the mirror scene too, in a way it fits my story instead to simply rehash in game dialogue. As such it remains a bit unresolved for the time being, since these two idiots wanted to fight instead of declaring eternal bff-ness for each other, heh.
Alistair has a special dream and Lenya is tempted to shove their guide to find the Paragon into a chasm. Both have a hard time dealing with being in the Deep Roads, but at least they are not alone. This is not always a good thing, though...

Chapter Notes

Quicker update this time, as promised. The long DR arc begins and as such updates will be (hopefully) faster to not stretch it out into months. Enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My dark disquiet singing such haunting melodies
So white, so still, so bright, it’s almost too painful now
I’m ready to fight, to run from the light

-- Poets Of The Fall - My Dark Disquiet

The sunrays tickled his skin, like the blades of grass of the field beneath him. Eyes closed against the brightness, Alistair dozed in the warmth of its light. The touch of her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp added to his comfortable drowsiness. Lying here in the flower field untouched by the Blight with his head in her lap, the world wasn't hopeless, wasn’t gray. It was... perfect.

Her motion stopped and fingers gliding down his cheek, Lenya bent over to kiss him. It was brief but sweet, her lips warming him far more than any sun ever could. He cracked one eye open in time to see her bemused smile haloed in the light. “It is time to get up, Alistair.”

“Hmm, no,” he groaned and turning his head, he nuzzled it back into her lap. “Don’t wanna.”

“I need your help, Alistair!” Her voice had an odd, urgent edge and she nudged his shoulder with increasing insistence. “Wake up, wake up!”

“Nooo,” Alistair whined, but her picture faded further from his grasp, until he snapped awake. The smell of fire smoke and rot replaced the fresh air and scent of flowers perceived. “W-what?” It wasn’t Lenya, but Nithius in front of him. A dream, only. For the fraction of a second, the elf stared at him and he stared back, unmoving. “Quick, it is Lenya!” he yelled, jolting backwards and out of the tent. With his armor half undone and a foot only partly in his boot, Alistair rushed after him, now high-alert. “You gotta keep them from killing each other!”

“Lenya!” Alistair lunged forward to pry his fellow Warden off... Oghren? “Don’t!” The dwarf pinned on the ground with a knife at his throat somehow did not recognize the severity of his situation, or worse, didn’t care. For he was laughing, even taunting her.
“I’m going to fucking kill this gross asshole!” She thrashed against his grasp, blind in fury. “After I cut off his balls.” Oh, yeah, right. There was a second knife, conveniently placed at Oghren’s groin, at the crack of his armor. “See if he is still laughing then.”

“Lenya, let go!” Alistair managed to remove the hand and then the knife from Oghren’s throat by applying the exact amount of pressure needed to her wrist. The second one, positioned downward was more difficult to get a grip on. Just as he reached over to disarm her, Lenya made a forward motion with her blade and slashed across Alistair’s unarmored palm. Blinded by the pain, Alistair stumbled back, clutching his hand with the unhurt one as warm blood trickled from the wound.

“Parshaara, can you do anything right?” Heavy footfalls ensued as the Qunari stepped forward, probably to remove Lenya from the situation and dwarf. The knife clattered on the ground and when Alistair came back to his senses, his fellow Warden stared back at him in shock, from another corner of their small camp.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit!” she exclaimed, breathless. “I didn’t want that to happen!”

Oghren fell into another fit of laughter and Sten kicked him once, hard. “Silence, dwarf, or I will cut out your tongue.”

“Ah, promises.” Oghren sat back up and reached for his flask for a pull. “Enjoyed the show, eeeeh?” Without words, the Qunari turned away in disgust.

“Let me help.” Nithius was once more in his field of vision, breaking his eye contact with Lenya. Pale blue light illuminated the shadows surrounding them, then his wound. Alistair winced in pain as the bleeding was stopped and his flesh mended magically.

He exhaled sharply, the pain faded like his wound, no longer visible. “T-thank you.”

“Na’nehn,” Nithius replied with a wink and sat back down at the small cookfire in the middle of their makeshift camp. With the crisis averted, everyone calmed down again. Not that Shale or Morrigan seemed to be bothered by the situation in the first place. Or Sten, for the matter. Why did he took so long to –

“Abelas, Alistair!” His breath caught in his throat as Lenya appeared in front of him. It was doing that a lot lately, but hey as silent as she moved no one could blam – “I didn’t – Are you alright?” Concern twisted her brows and expression; the prior fury extinguished like a flame hit by a sudden gust. Even with her back turned to the fire, its light reflected brightly in her green elven eyes as she glanced up to him.

“Y-yes.” Alistair swallowed thickly, his throat suddenly as dry as the dust lingering in the Deep Road’s air. Well, it was probably more than just dust, but it was best not to think – He froze when her gloved fingers grasped his hand and turned it over to squint as his palm. The blood had started to dry and crust within, so she couldn’t get a clear view of the knife cut. Recognizing that, Lenya reached for her water skin at her belt with her free hand, uncorked it with her teeth and spilled her water over his palm. He should withdraw and assuage her fears, but she held his hand firmly throughout the process. His hand… in hers, Maker!

Again and again, she wiped at his palm with her gloved thumb until the blood was completely washed away. An angry pink line upon brown skin was all that was left then. Lenya let out a relieved breath and murmured foreign words under her breath. “I’m fine,” Alistair said, hoping his voice was louder than the heartbeat thrumming in his ears. “You shouldn’t waste water like this, down here in the Deep Roads.”
“Fuck that.” Her crass words stood in stark contrast with her gentle concern displayed. For him, at that. It was – “Least I can do after… –“ Her posture deflated with a sigh and she let go to rub at her forehead. Even without that telltale gesture, it was obvious how tired and on the edge she was and had been for a week now. Or more. Keeping track of the time and days passed in the Deep Roads became harder each day. “I shouldn’t have done that, but this creator-damned asshole… he kept running his mouth and – ugh. I hate him and next time we are near a chasm I’m going to shove him in it!”

“Please don’t!” Her head snapped up to him, eyes narrowing. “I.. understand, Lenya. Oghren isn’t exactly my favorite person either, but he is the only guide and lead we have to find this Branka. He was – is – her husband, after all.”

“Which he fucking knows by the way, since he has been laughing at me. He thinks himself being invincible and I will –“

“– take a break, since you need it?” he offered, attempting a smile that hopefully was disarming. “Look, I’m up now anyway and can keep watch in your stead.” The problem with them being the last Wardens especially in the Deep Roads was that one of them always had to be awake in order to warn the others ahead of time of an incoming darkspawn horde. “It is a long way till Caridin’s Cross tomorrow and who knows how much longer beyond that. We have to rest and gather our strength when we can, to make it out alive here.”

“Right. Right, puppy.” Lenya shifted in place, her armor clanked in the movement. “Because resting… in this shit place is so refreshing.”

“I know.”Well he’d rested fine until Nithius – Oh no. Guilt gnawed at his insides like Revas at a bone, as pictures of his dream came back to the forefront of his mind. The touch of her hand in his hair, now burning in his palm, made real. Not literal burning of course, but a lingering sensation of her fingers there, and Maker he was going stone cold mad, if that continued. This attraction toward her was ridiculous, utterly displaced and –

“What happened to your armor?” There she was again, stepping into his personal space.

“Well, I partly unbuckled it to be able to sleep better.” Alistair shrugged with a smile. “And I was kind of in a hurry just now, as you have seen.”

“Hmm.” Reaching up, she started to fasten the loose buckles of his armor. What, now? “Hold still.”

“W-what are you doing?”

“This is hard to do on your own. I know that, you know that. Stop being a da’len.” Her aid was less the problem than her proximity. Dust and dirt clang to her skin and hair, subduing its warm, blond strands to a more dull color. She smelled like it too, but it was hard to keep clean in the Deep Roads, especially after weeks of travel underground. Maker knew, as hard as he tried, he wasn’t a sweet smelling flower himself right now. Though she wasn’t bothered by it… much. Nor was he, for that matter. She still was Lenya and… pretty. Very, even.

Her brows drawn together in a concentrated frown, she worked fast and efficient to secure all fastenings he struggled to reach on his own. She shook her head to get a bothering long strand of hair out of her eyes and his fingers itched with the urge to do it for her, when it didn’t budge. Alistair curled his unarmored hand to a fist to keep himself from doing so. Well good that she managed it herself then with blowing the strand out of her way right after all. Bad was how she licked her lips afterwards. It had been just a dream. She never kissed him for real, never would, but the
remembrance of their warmth and softness still lingered on his own lips, like a ghost.

“Turn around,” Lenya commanded and he followed suit, saving him from looking at her mouth… anymore than he already did. While she fastened the buckles at his back, Alistair squeezed his eyes shut and grimaced as the heat rose to his cheeks. When would it finally pass, this attraction? “There, done.” She patted him twice on the armored back. “Now, a darkspawn is less likely to kill you.”

“Yeah, I have my fellow Warden for that already,” Alistair blurted and stopped dead in his tracks right after. Maker, this mouth of his would be his end someday. Slowly, he looked back over his shoulder at her, expecting anger yet finding only mild bemusement.

“I accidentally slashed you, not stabbed you. Big difference, puppy. Because then, you would have been dead.”

“And you would miss me, right?” Oh no, he did it again. Stop self, stop!

Lenya snorted. “Yeah, like a sharp stone in my back while sleeping on the ground.”

Ouch, how typical, that answer. He stepped away from her, needed that distance between them. “Get some rest, yeah?”

“Stop nagging, human. I’m going,” she said with a roll of her eyes and went, instead of toward the tent, to the cookfire. Didn’t she agree – oh. She was picking up her blades to belt them again.

“Going now?” Oghren was either exceptionally brave or stupid to address her after everything that happened. Given how he leered at Lenya, it was much more of the later. “Sweet dreams, Missy. Tehehe.” Lenya had already half turned and now froze in her tracks. Whirling back around in one fluid motion, she used the momentum to punch him square in the face. The dwarf crashed to the ground with his upper back first and passed out. Andraste’s mercy. Alistair could do nothing but stare, his mind and pulse racing. It had been a matter of split-seconds at most, but –

“Good night, asshole.”

Nithius sprang up from his place, rushed over to Oghren, probably to check his vitals, while Lenya passed by Alistair. “You scare me, you know that?” He had told her that so often already and always meant it. Particularly tonight. Or day. Or whatever time it currently was.

“Good,” she replied, and with a hint of a smile, ducked into the tent. Her reply was always the same too and for some reason this was nice, made him smile as well. Shaking his head to push the thought back where it belonged, he turned toward Oghren and Nithius.

“Is he –“

“… snoring, yes,” the elf replied as he returned to his place at the fire. “Knocked him out good but otherwise? Right as rain. Maybe some bruising. He deserves it, though.”

“Can’t argue here. Testing boundaries with Lenya… is unwise, to say the least. Possibly deadly too.” Alistair paused to deliberate. “No, scratch the ‘possibly.’”

“Yet you are doing so constantly… and still live.”

“Hah.” He sat down on the ground, opposite of the elven mage. “Fellow Warden bonus? Or maybe I simply have more luck than judgment.”
“Oooor,” Nithius drawled, drinking the remainder of the stew out of his earthen cup. “… you simply respect her boundaries, unlike other people in our group. And she knows that.”

Putting his foot in his mouth more often than not in spite, to respect someone’s boundaries was just basic courtesy. Something the dwarf so obviously lacks. “I have been raised to respect people, and this includes women, of course.”

“Of course. And where do you learn such manners, pray tell?”

“Well, the Chantry isn’t exactly a place for rambunctious boys, you see?” A smile splayed across his face. “Not that I didn’t try, mind you. Good times.”

“You are a templar?”

Ah yes, with Nithius preferring leather armor instead of the usual mage robes made it easy to forget sometimes that he was, indeed, a mage. Alistair glanced into the shadowed corner where Morrigan lay curled up as wolf, sleeping. Unlike the witch and her weird magic, he had been raised in the Circle. ”No. Nooo,” he hurried to explain. “I was trained as one, but I never become a templar, thankfully. Big difference. Never wanted it either, but ten years old me didn’t have much of a choice when I was carted off at the nearest monastery.”

“I see.” The elf relaxed his wary stance. “Come to think of it, this explains why the darkspawn mage was drained of mana.”

Right, the ambush a couple of days ago. “Yeah, Dunc – the former Warden Commander urged me to keep the training up as a Warden, so I did. As seen, it proves useful.”

“I’m sorry. It is horrible what happened to your Order.”

“Yeah…” Alistair glanced away, down into the sparse flames near his feet. They burned brighter that night, in blaze and ash. Sure, that traitor was to blame for sounding the retreat, but wasn’t it his fault as well? They had been too late to give the signal, with all the darkspawn in the tower. He shook his head, willing the thought away. “Why do you want to be conscripted then, knowing the state they are in?” he asked, looking back up. “We aren’t exactly the most experienced Wardens either…” Nor did they even know how to do a Joining. Maker, this whole idea of taking Nithius with them after the Deep Roads was insane. Maybe even to the Deep Roads was, at that. As helpful as he was, they also –

“I’m an apostate, Alistair. I don’t have much choice,” the elf interrupted his thoughts. “It is either joining the wardens or watching over my shoulder for the rest of my life.” He scoffed.” However long that may be.”

“You were living pretty comfortable with Harrowmont, last time I checked. Being his house healer and all.”

“Perhaps. These days are limited, however, especially once my lord becomes king.” He shrugged. “Too many eyes on him then.”

Ah. This made sense. “And in return on you.”

“Yessss,” Nithius drew out the word in a suppressed yawn. “Besides, as I told Mahariel already… I miss the sun and fresh air. Orzammar was nice and home to me the past years, but I’m no dwarf. I am not made for a life underground.”

As much this was understandable too, he was using his recruitment as a way out, a wholly selfish
reason. “There is a Blight going on and –”

“– and I won’t be able to help there, you mean?”

“You are already helping, Nithius. It’s just –” Alistair gestured with his hands, let his words fade into a sigh. Their other companions weren’t exactly here for altruistic reasons either, right? So maybe it wasn’t fair to hold it against him. In the end, aid was aid, independent from its source or reason.

The elf arched an eyebrow, looked at him funny with a chuckle. “She is pretty but I have no interest in Lenya this way, if that is what you are worr –”

“Maker, no!” He rushed to object, but of course his face started to warm and of course the heat spread out across his body. It was doing that a lot lately upon the mere mention of her name or proximity, like clockwork. Dreaming of her was new, but both equally unwelcome. Hopefully this stupid fixation would pass once they were out of here. Whenever that would be.

“You like her, don’t you?”

“I… –” His eyes flicked to the improvised tent with Lenya in it not far away. Elves had better hearing, so better to not risk anything, least of all his head. It was a fool’s notion anyway. “She is my fellow Warden.”

“I see.” Nithius followed his gaze and huffed out a laugh. “Your secret is safe with me, lethallan.”

“What? It is not a secret, it is obvious,” Alistair replied and stopped mid-sentence, mouth plopping shut. Her being his fellow Warden wasn’t what he meant, right? Now it sounded like... oh. Oh, no.

“I agree. It is. Except to her.” His chuckle was deep and hearty and once more faded into a yawn. How nice that he was able to add to the elf’s amusement. “I’d love to keep you company, maybe give you some tips even...” Please don’t. “...Though I should rather catch a bit of sleep, so I am still of use tomorrow.”

“Yeah...” Oghren’s snoring stopped for a stuttering inhale, before droning through the makeshift camp again. At least someone here got a decent shuteye. “Probably for the best. We are expected to reach Caridin’s Cross tomorrow, but it will be still a long march. I will be alright.” Alistair nodded toward Shale and Sten who more or less enthusiastically kept watch alongside of him. Well, Sten was more mediating, sitting unmoving in place with his eyes closed. No doubt he would be ready for battle in a split-second, however.

“Okay.” Nithius hesitated for a bit, turned and reached for Oghren’s flask.

“What are you doing?”

The elf opened the flask and spilled about half of the alcohol onto the ground. Its smell was strong, bit in his nose sharply after mere seconds. Then, Nithius uncorked his own water bottle and filled it back up with water. “Can’t have him lead us drunk, right?”

Oh. Good idea. As healer it made sense that he thought of that. “Yeah, I guess.”

Carefully, he put the flask back into Oghren’s possession, who was still out of it. “Best way to ween him off of it over time, or at least having him less drunk down here. Should help to regulate his gross behavior too...” The elf paused to deliberate. “…a little, at least.” Standing up, he patted Alistair’s armored shoulder. “See you in a bit, lethallan.”
“Yeah…” Alistair exhaled and swallowed thickly, being now left alone at the fire and with his thoughts. “Good night.”

As expected, Caridin’s Cross had not been the goal of their journey, but only a waypoint showing how to proceed further. Great, more Deep Roads. As if the weeks before hadn’t already sufficed in that shithole. Well nothing left than marching forward then and take out her frustrations on the darkspawn which would jump out of the dark and call it an ambush every five steps or so. The stale air reeked of rot, musty caves and, of course, darkspawn. Because what else was here than depressing darkness, rocks everywhere and these bastards? Creators, to think she could hate a place more than Orzammar, but here she was, along with more or less wanted company.

“I can see Branka all over this place,” the durgen'len asshole spoke up, halted his steps as he peered about. The lingering blackness was only scattered by Morrigan’s and Nithius staffs illuminating their imminent surroundings. He touched the cracked stone of a pillar. Too bad it wasn’t near a cliff, though she hadn’t fully given up on her plans to throw him down one, soon. “She always took chips from the walls at regular intervals when she was in a new tunnel – check their composition.”

“Yeah, we have reached Ortan Thaig and still no Branka here. So this information is worth hallah-shit,” Lenya bit back, eyes narrowing on the durgen'len. “I bet she already has become darkspawn fodder. This… whole thing is stupid!” Why did she agree to the search? Ever?

“Well, aren’t you a sodding bright spot today?” He reciprocated her glower and the dim light reflected in his eyes like it did in her own. Huh, so that have elves and durgen'len in common then? Makes sense, seeing how they live underneath all this rock all the time, ugh. “If everyone's dead, there'd be evidence of a major battle, wouldn't there? Three hundred or so dwarves don't just fade away.”

“True, we have to remember that Branka took her whole house with herself to this expedition,” Nithius said, stepping at her side. “Many people followed her in her search.”

“As did my house,” the asshole muttered in return, staring off into the distance.

“Right, I'm sorry, Oghren. What can you tell us about Ortan Thaig?”

The durgen'len scoffed. “Here for a history lesson, Harrowmont boy? We better get moving instead, the anvil won’t appear when we stand here, talking.”

“I, ugh, agree with the stinking dwarf,” Morrigan said, scrunching her nose in disdain. “We shall not linger about in this place.”

“My, witchy, your praise goes down like ale. Which reminds me, heh.” His reach for his flask was accompanied by Morrigan's disgusted noise. Well, Lenya couldn't blame her, quite the opposite. Balling her fists was all she could do to not let them land into that durgen'len’s face again.

“Expect my staff to go down on your head as well, should you continue to call me that!”

“Heh, promises, promises.” He shrugged her off. “Alright, I’m gonna humor you, boy.”

“Do so while walking, dwarf!” Sten grumbled, shoving him forward at his back. The asshole got the message for once and started moving again, up front. Lenya let herself fall back to the middle of their group next to Morrigan and Sten, whereas Alistair stayed at the rear, along with Shale. He was uncharacteristically silent and this for days now. Being a Warden like herself, it didn’t surprise her. Everything about the Deep Roads was oppressing and the overwhelming presence of
darkspawn here never stopped to scream in and scratch at the back her head. Not really, anyway.

“This here, was Caridin's home thaig.” His voice echoed off the vast, crumbled walls they passed, disturbing the dead silence looming ahead. “He was an Ortan before he got raised to Paragon. Even stayed here when he could have had his own house,” the durgen'len shook his head, huffed out a bitter laugh. “Of course, that was all before he built the Anvil. After that, he was the city's pet genius until he angered the king and fell into disfavor.”

“So It has no idea where this Caradin or the anvil are?” Shale’s tone held its usual contempt, though its volume was made even more impressive by the absence of any other sound. The green crystals within the golem’s stone gleamed all the more brightly in the dark, making it a bit more bearable.

“No one does, you sodding pile of rocks.” He turned to glare at the golem. “At the time, Ortan Thaig was almost part of the main city. No one bothered to mark where the Anvil was stored and it's impossible to know if it's been moved or even destroyed.” Great, so they were wasting their time down here in this shithole. What else was new? “But trust me. If we find it, we find Branka. She figured if the Anvil wasn't here, there would at least be some clue here to point her to where it is. We have to look for that.”

“You know when I was young, I or another kid would toss random things into the woods and the task was to find them again. Whoever found them first had won.”

“That is cute, actually.” Lenya jumped a bit at Alistair’s voice behind her, since he had been quiet for so long.

“Yeah, in the woods, maybe. And there we knew the general direction and form of the objects that had been thrown, and where they were.” She gestured wildly with her hands, pointed toward the darkness ahead. “Down here in this shithole, we have have neither. So it lost its charm quickly. Besides, I’m not seven anymore.”

“Right. I get what you mean.” His laugh was warm, like the look within his eyes. Which kept faintly reflecting the surrounding light, by the way. Yeah, right. Nothing elven about this at all, nope. However this wasn’t the place nor time to talk about it. Nor did she care much. It was simply constantly noticeable here due to the lack of light around them. “I don’t like this wild goose chase, either. But we don’t have much choice in the matter.”

“Story of my life,” she muttered and sped up her steps once more.

Compared to the other areas of the Deep Roads, this part was bright. Light filtered through various cracks of the ceiling, splaying across gigantic statues of durgen'len from yesteryear. Alas, spiders, also gigantic, seemed to love this wide place too and used it for an attack.

These fucking things. Lenya wasn’t at all squeamish, but the sound of their big hairy legs skittering across the stone and their hiss as they attacked was yet another recipe for nightmares. Another to add to the list, down here. Not to mention how their stinky and slimy innards stuck to her armor and weapon after killing them. Yep, of all insects or animals, these large assholes were the worst. Okay, second worst, after cats. These were creatures of pure evil, sent by Fen'harel itself.

“You okay…?” Touching somehow that the human kept checking up on her after each fight. Unneeded, too. Whatever, he was simply not keen on being left alone in this mess, quite literal. Something she couldn't blame him for.
Lenya wrinkled her nose, stepped backwards and out of the puddle of goo amassed on the ground. “No puppy, I am not. Do I look –“

A scream tore through the caves and into her words. Whipping around, something – or someone, more like – was rushing through the darker parts of the area, toward the tunnel in the back. Sten lunged forward, was shifting from a jog to a full on sprint, to catch up on the creature as it tried to escape. Snatching them up by the collar, their screams intensified. “Let me goooo!” Their – his – voice was scratchy and erratic, growing even more so, as he fought against the Qunari’s iron grip. “There is nothing for you here! It is miieeeine. I claimed it!” The feeling at the back of her head, that itch she wasn’t able to scratch, the nausea rising within – Oh. Oh no.

“No not a darkspawn,” Sten scoffed, letting the man plop on the ground as he released him. “And yet he is –“

“– tainted,” Lenya and Alistair uttered in unison, sharing a glance. He was as shocked as herself to find someone down here that wasn’t spiders or darkspawn, albeit barely.

The creature – durgen’len – scrambled backwards, struggled to get back on his feet. Dark blotches ran across his face and arms and when he got back up, his posture was twisted, crooked. “You have come to take my claim. You surfacers are all alike: thieving scoundrels. Well I found it first!”

"Bah!” Oghren said and spat on the ground. "He's a bloody scavenger. Good as sodding gone, twisted by the taint. Word has it you can only survive down here by eating the flesh of darkspawn corpses."

"Eww.” Lenya exclaimed and nearly stumbled over a darkspawn corpse next to her. Nope, she refused to think how that rotten was likely going to be the durgen'len's next meal. “How could anyone –“ Sure, people did the most stupid things in order to survive, but – “Eww,” she repeated instead. Her fellow Warden shared the disgust, but there was also pity in his gaze.

"Begone you!” the man screamed, now in a safe distance. "You'll bring the dark ones back, you will! They'll crunch your bones! Crunch your boooones!” He ran away, escaping further down the tunnel.

“Ugh. Let me guess, we have to go where he is?”

“"Aye.” The asshole durgen'len moved forward to squint at some rock. He hadn’t been doing much else for hours, so this wasn’t anything new. “We're definitely on the right track. I can see she marked some of the walls. Little hard to see against all the other marks there, but they're hers, sure enough.”

“That… man,” Nithius swallowed, was visibly shaken. “Is this what happens to people who are tainted?”

“Without becoming a Warden? Yes.” There was pain in Alistair’s voice. Pity too, perhaps. “Or worse. Most don’t survive that long, though.”

The ground spun around her; slowly at first, then quicker as bile rose into her throat. Was this what happened to Tamlen? Did he suffer before he died, all alone? This man, it could – should – have her instead, but she had been saved, unlike him. Yeah, sure, saved! She would end up like that durgen'len, wouldn’t she? Twisted and driven mad by the taint inside, the dark disquiet already looming. It was only a matter of time. Lenya rushed to the side and emptied the content of her stomach there.
“Lenya!” Of course he followed. Like a damn puppy would. Blinking away the tears burning in her eyes, she wiped at her mouth. Only to smear the spider goo further across her face. Fucking Mythal’s tits! This place was the worst!

Water splashed behind her as he uncorked his skein. “Here.” Alistair handed her a wet handkerchief that was even decently clean. She took it, albeit with some hesitance, and cleaned herself as best she could with it.

“You shouldn't waste water down here,” she said without looking at him, echoing his words from a few days ago.

“It is not wasted in this case.”

Ah. His earnestness still was unfamiliar, at times. “Thank you.”

“He is not you, you know? Nor are you him, for that matter.”

Lenya sucked in air at that. Creators, there was no fooling this human, huh? “That obvious, huh?”

“A little, yes.” Alistair shrugged with one shoulder and smiled a bit. “Besides, I was there in Ostagar when you arrived, remember?” Yeah, he had seen her all feverish and delirious. Not her finest moment. Without Marethari and her magic keeping the taint at bay though, it would have been so much worse.

She stemmed herself from the wall, using the momentum to turn away from the uncomfortable smell. Her knees were still a bit wobbly. “Yeah, I do. I called you an idiot and passed out.” It seemed so long ago, not only mere weeks.

“As said...” He laughed, warm and bright. “You were not the first to do either to me. Certainly not in this combination, but –”

“Look at the tracks on the floor, Wardens!” The damn durgen’len interrupted her fellow Warden. “They are old, but there were a lot of people and fires there once. Branka has definitely passed through here.”

“Right, we should probably get back to it,” Alistair said, coughing into his hand. “You okay?”

Again, this question. This time it was somewhat justified, however. “Down here? Never.”

“Yeah, same,” he replied, all humor gone as he turned around to go. “But I’m glad I’m not alone.” Lenya halted for a moment and balled the soggy handkerchief in her gloved hands. So am I.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes:

The dream and following scene is completely new, just elements of Nithius talking with Alistair are taken from the old version. The canon caridin's cross scene is more shortened to not rehash ingame things too much. Ruck's appearance however is as important as it was in the old version, for various reasons, and as such meeting him sets things up for the next chapter. Couldn't resist to write a callback to Lenya/stair's first meeting either, hehe. Timewise about two to three months have passed since
Ostagar, including the current time passed in the DR. Just FYI ;) 

Thanks for reading my story and chapter update. Let me know what you think and what you liked in the comments, maybe? It would be most appreciated <3
Once Upon A Playground, Rainy

Chapter Summary

While meeting Ruck helps them to get on the right track to find Branka, it elicits uncomfortable memories of past and possible future for Lenya. After her panicked flight away from Ruck, tensions between the group is running high, and Nithius in particular proves to be an unexpected kindred spirit.

Chapter Notes

As usual the title is taken from a Poets Of The Fall song and to be understood as the "melancholy of things past/when you were younger" and not in a literal sense, of course. Thank you all for your wonderful support so far and I hope you like this chapter as well. It is one I am quite adoring, for many reasons. Enjoy?

Btw, if you don't mind spoilers for this story and are interested in how i handled the Fade thing in DA:I, check out the a multi-chaptered fic (2/6 chapters so far) set in Lenyaverse I have begun to write. Also the reason why this update is a bit later than the last one, since i worked on this story here: Goodbye, Tonight

They arrived in an enclosed space soon after passing the tunnel. It was a dead end, but an oddly decorated one. Bits and pieces of broken furniture were stacked on top of each other, building some sort of improvised wall and home. His home. A large, half-shattered vase lay in the center and was filled with all kind of useless but shiny bauble. The tracks outside led them here, where the tainted durgen'len stood, crooked and wrong and equally broken like the things behind him. The light of the fireplace flickering in front of him only accented the dark blotches within his face. Lenya had to avert her eyes from him, too nauseous to speak.

"Is this Branka's campsite?" Alistair asked in her stead.

"It is miiiine!" he spat with such aggression that Sten drew his blade. Lenya threw the Qunari a look and shook her head. They needed him, for information on Branka. Doubtful he was still lucid enough for that, though. "I'm the one who found it. I drove out the crawlers. Now it's mine!"

"Was this campsite here when you found it?" the drunkard asshole asked, before Alistair could.

"Everything was here. Everything the crawlers did not already take! Rocks and tents and worms! It's all mine!" the durgen'len yelled and hunched over more, like an animal preparing to attack.

"We are not here to steal anything, I promise," her fellow Warden said, raising his hands up to placate the creature – man, err, dwarf. It was hard for her to still think of him as a person, as far gone he was. They were wasting their time. They should leave, she should – Lenya’s posture stiffened as she forced herself not to move. It was all she could do to keep herself from bolting.

"Pretty lady... pretty eyes, pretty hair... smells like the stream of burning water, blue as the deepest
rock...” Addressing her in the most creepy way, his gaze flicked over to her. Lenya recoiled, panic knotting her guts. *Get out! Get away get away, what are you waiting for?* Nevertheless she remained in place, even as his gaze lingered and his scratchy voice softened, however slightly. “So... the pretty lady won't take anything from Ruck? You won't take Ruck's shiny worms and pretty rocks?”

Oh. Oh no. Lenya knew that name. By the Creators, please don’t let it be one and the same. “Your name is...Ruck?”

“Yes, yes yes.” He nodded frantically. “But Ruck not pretty name, not pretty like lady. Ruck is small and ugly and twisted.”

No objection there. And yet the name stung her inside, twisting them with the knowledge of its meaning and reason why. For a brief moment, her eyes fell shut, pained. Creators, why. Why did they have to run into him? “I… I have met your mother, Ruck.”

Ruck’s eyes widened, shock apparent in these near milky-white pupils. Was this the future waiting for her, what she would become? “No no no no! No mother!” He balked away from her and his voice rose, became hysterical. “No warm blanket and stew and pillow and soft words! Ruck doesn’t deserve good memories. No-no-no-no-no-no...”

“She asked me to find you,” Lenya continued while keeping her eyes trained on him and one hand close to the hilt of her blade. It was more an ingrained reflex than necessity, but better to be safe. “Back in Orzammar.”

The tainted durgen’len faltered, all aggression and agitation gone from his posture and voice at once. “She – she did not know, not what I did. I was very, very, very, very angry, and then someone was dead. They wanted to send Ruck to the mines.” Ruck shook his head miserably. “If I went to the mines, sh-she would know. Everyone would know. So I came here, instead.”

"Look at him," the durgen’len’s voice was laced with disgust. Not that the sentiment wasn’t valid, but from the drunk, creepy asshole? Talk about hypocrisy. "He's like a pale mud worm. He should've been sent to the mines. Instead he chose this.” He glanced up to her, for once without a leer. “I'd put him out of his misery, Warden.” Like herself, Alistair remained rooted on his spot, staring unmoving at the creature in front of them. He was tense, his shoulders squared, as if unsure whether to attack or run away. Also like herself. Huh. Curious.

Ruck was more fazed by Oghren’s words, understood the implications made. "It's not so bad,” he protested meekly, taking a few steps back. “The dark and the burning keeps Ruck warm... warm like Mother's arms!” Oh, lovely. “Once you eat... once you takes in the darkness... You not miss the light so much.” The tainted durgen'len fixed her with his milky eyes, his manner suddenly all too normal. Like the person he once had been. “You know, do you not? Ruck sees, yes. He sees the darkness inside you.”

The words cut deeply with their clarity, like only a weapon otherwise could. A shiver ran down her spine and manifested into many tiny tremors. Her hands shook first, but the terror clawed its way up and downwards until it spread through all of her body. No. No. No. No. Lenya recoiled, as the fear reached her heart. It beat too fast and too loud in her chest and ears. She couldn’t breathe, better to leave, to get away. Now! It was a hand on her shoulder who stopped her from turning and bolting. *His* hand, anchoring her in place. Not forcefully, but supportive and firm. “I’m not like you!” Why was her voice so weak? *Creators, stop shaking!* “I’m not –“

“We are Grey Wardens,” Alistair said, his voice dulled as if underwater. “It is different.” He turned to her, the weight of his gauntleted hand still resting on her upper arm. “Breathe, Lenya.
Can you do that?” Incapable to speak, she gave him a nod.

“Grey like the stone. Guardian against the darkness,” Ruck said, shifting his focus on Alistair. At last she could look away, close her eyes and concentrate on something else. The durgen’len’s scratchy voice rang through the cave again, in an awed manner. “Beautiful like waterfalls under the lichen.”

“Yeah, um, right,” her fellow Warden replied and shifted on his feet. “We should leave –“

“Finally a good idea for once,” groaned Morrigan, cutting into his words.

“B-but what about your mother?” The witch let out another groan upon his anew question, more annoyed now. “Don’t you –“

“No, no, no. She cannot know! Better she thinks Ruck is dead. Less shameful for her. Ruck does not want to remember her! No, Ruck does not deserve good memories of loving mother!” Counting upwards to twenty a final time, Lenya reopened her eyes. Ruck took it as opportunity to address her again. Oh no. “Please, pretty lady, promise to tell Mother that Ruck is dead. It is… better for her if she thinks Ruck is dead.”

“Poor sod is already as good as gone,” the asshole scoffed. “Worse than that, even.”

While she ignored his words they were helpful to focus on Ruck’s request. “Yeah, fine, I will. Whatever.” Better than to tell her what became of her son. What would become of her – no, focus! She shook her head, made the mistake to lick her chapped lips. Ugh. They tasted like dust, spider innards and her own vomit. Great. Just perfect. “Did you find anything unusual here?”

"Bits of things but only bits. The crawlers took almost everything,” Ruck said, his smile as crooked as his posture. “They takes things of steel and things of paper. They takes the shinies and the words."

"Paper and words?" the asshole gasped out. "That sounds like someone was taking notes. We have to find them, it will lead us to Branka’s whereabouts. Sodding sure about that, Warden."

Wasn’t he saying it for weeks now? Look where it got them. In the ass-deep of fucking nowhere. "They bring them to the great nest, the nest they makes for the eggs. They puts the shinies inside, they do!"

More fucking spiders? This was a never-ending nightmare. Such was her life, alas. “Right. Find the nest, find the things. Got it.” She turned to leave, finally giving into the impulse burning inside ever since meeting Ruck.

“The dark ones went south, pretty lady!” But like before, his voice scratching at the back of her head as only darkspawn normally do, stopped her. “To the dark master, who called them with his beautiful voice. So much joy when he awoke!”

“The archdemon...” Alistair gasped out, his voice trembling. Oh, of course this immortal fucker was here too, because why not? Everything shitty and bad was down here, after all.

“After the dark master awoke, he called his children and they all went,” Ruck continued. Could this creepy asshole please shut up? “I wanted to go, too, and gaze upon his beauty…”

“Where… is this dark master now?” Her fellow Warden asked, his voice barely above a whisper. “Do you know?”
“He stopped calling,” Ruck replied. Creators, why was he sad about it? “I wish I could go see him, but Ruck, no, no, Ruck-Ruck is a coward.”

With her back turned to the creature – durgen=len – Lenya nudged Alistair’s armored arm. “We should leave, this is pointless.”

“Right.” He bowed his head and his warm breath tickled her ear. “You want to leave him like that? Would it not be kinder to –” Trailing off, he made a more or less subtle stabbing motion with his hand.

A mercy kill? Maybe, they should. Though as twisted Ruck was, he seemed content here, had survived for so long. No, better to leave him be. He was harmless, unlike everything else in the Deep Roads. “We have wasted enough time already. We need to find these papers and I need to –” Her remaining words were swallowed by the tremble rocking through her body, fueling her flight. The calling of her name from her companions was lost to the frantic heartbeat in her ears as she ran.

Please let her be here!

Running along the long tunnel after Alistair and following the trail of spiderwebs, the fear of having lost Mahariel permanently crept up in his mind. But here she was after all, hacking away at a long dead spider on the ground that was even more gigantic than the last ones. Nithius let his hands rest on his knees, breathless through the wild chase after Mahariel. Maker, all these years at Harrowmont’s side made him soft indeed. Not that he got much exercise in the tower either, but right now the templars would be able to scoop him up kicking and screaming after an hour tops in the condition he was currently in. Something to work on later, once they were out here again. Much needed too, since everything with the Wardens was more extreme. As was Mahariel’s behavior. She’d been on an edge since weeks, basically right after entering the Deep Roads.

Nithius approached her cautiously, not unlike he did with a halla in pain back then. He shook his head. No time for these thoughts or memories now. Though Mahariel was like a ghost of the past in this regard. He missed this life she had led and he’d too, before escaping to Orzammar and its fire and stone and politics.

“Lenya.” Of course he was quicker in reaching out. Since weeks the Warden was watching her whenever he thought no one was watching him. His concern and care for his fellow Warden continued to poke through the excuse of camaraderie he also continued to give. He was a good person, maybe a bit naive and awkward. No surprise with his age though.

Mahariel’s back stiffened, her motions halted through her fellow Warden’s approach, at least. She still had her weapons raised, as though unsure whether to maintain her fit of blind rage, or to stop. Perhaps some distraction would help to settle her mind?

“I think it is dead, lethallin,” he said in her tongue to her. Given, he was a bit rusty in elvhen, yet it was nice to finally have someone to speak it with again. Another thing he’d missed and she was a reminder of. How fitting. “Venavis!”

Mahariel’s weapons clattered as her hands shook, her fight for her bearings almost as intense as the various spider gore bits around and in front of her. She did quick work on it for sure, as expected of
a Dalish hunter and Warden. But in a way she was also like a halla in pain, ready to lash out or bolt at any time. There was a lot of hurt there, beneath the facade of bravery. That too, was a reminder of things past. Alas.

“Hey, it is okay,” Alistair said while hovering around but not over her, leaving a careful distance. It seemed he’d learned how to prod her just enough without going too far. Hasty footsteps echoed through the tunnel behind them and all heads turned toward the sound. The others had caught up with them, at last.

“Hmph,” Oghren observed the situation before him, which was tense as ever. “Next time? Don’t run ahead, Missy.”

“Shut up, asshole!” she screamed, reacting as expected.

“No need to be so rude,” he huffed with a shrug. “Just saying there are worse things ahead here than a few spiders. Now to find the papers...” Trailing off with his words, Oghren turned away from Mahariel to search the ground.

“Lenya...” Her fellow Warden tried anew but was cut short by Mahariel snapping at him.

“Stop Lenya me, human. I’m sick of it,” she spat, his fury now directed at Alistair. “I’m fucking sick of you hovering around and fussing over me like I’m an incompetent da’len!”

He flinched under her harsh words, before raising his chin in defiance. “Well sorry for worrying about you, fellow Warden!”

“Worried about what?” She invaded his personal space with a few hasty steps. Each word was accentuated by an angry poke of her gloved finger at his chestplate. “Me running off and leaving you alone with this shit, fellow Warden?”

Mahariel made a mockery out of the title... and Alistair, for that matter. He shouldn't get involved, but – “That is not fair, and you know it.” Yeah, he’d never been good in standing by doing nothing in the face of injustice.

Big mistake, for now her ire focused on him, alas. “Not fair? Look who's talking: The flat ear who is taking the first opportunity out, once hiding in Orzammar isn’t working anymore! You want to lecture me?” She whirled around and away from himself. “You know what? Fuck you. All of you. I am done!” Her blades cluttered on the ground as she stormed away, to the furthest corner of the tunnel.

“So It has finally snapped, huh?” Nithius jumped as the golem’s gravelly voice echoed behind him. Creators, even with weeks in its presence he could not get used to the walking and talking pile of rocks. “Do you think the Painted Warden will try to murder the Warden Clown now?” The creature chuckled. “I would not be opposed in watching it happen.”

“Thank you Shale,” Alistair remarked while picking up Mahariel’s weapons. “Your support is heartwarming.”

“The elf is not fit to lead,” the Qunari said, more than a hint of distaste in his voice. “Someone else should do so.”

“Oh? Mutiny, Sten?” Morrigan’s eyes narrowed on the giant man as she glared up to him. For a human, they had an odd color, so bright. Probably a side-effect of her unconventional magic. “You are a fool, if you believe I would ever follow your lead!”
“I can’t believe I’m saying this...” Alistair shook his head. “But I agree with Morrigan. We have enough problems already. Do not add to them, Sten.”

“It wouldn't be even one, if you had a backbone, human!”


With a snip of her finger, the witch renewed the wisp of light swirling over her head. “Oh, I wish.”

“Emotions are running high.” He would regret speaking up here too, huh? “Perhaps it is for the best if we make camp here.”

“Here?” Morrigan regarded him coolly. “I would prefer not. Tis –“

“Hah! I knew it! I knew she still cared!” Oghren barked out a laugh, interrupting her. “Branka was thinking about me. Old softy.”

Nithius walked over to the dwarf to take a look at the found letters himself. They were partly torn and the words hastily scribbled down in dwarven. After all these years at Harrowmont’s side, reading the runic language was not a problem at all. “We found evidence today that the Anvil of the Void was not built in Ortan Thaig. We will go south, to the Dead Trenches. The Anvil is somewhere beyond,” he read, out loud for the others. “I will leave this here in case I die in the Trenches. Perhaps someone can yet walk past my corpse and retrieve the Anvil. For if it remains lost, so do we all.” There was a part about Oghren there too he must have meant, but nothing the others needed to know.

“Looks like the Dead Trenches is our next stop, then,” Oghren peered into the distance where Mahariel had stomped off into, and frowned. “Sodding long trek to reach it, though. Weeks at best from here out. It is crawling with darkspawn too. Whole hordes of ‘em.”

Alistair let out an annoyed sigh. “Oh, of course, it is.”

“But if that's where Branka went, then that's where I'm going. No doubt about it.” Oghren turned toward them with a sigh of his own. “We best make camp nearby, get some shuteye while we can.”

“Yeah,” Nithius agreed. “We already have been marching for hours, fought all kind of creatures and the next stop is weeks away.”

“Well, seems like you get your wish after all, elf,” Morrigan said with a sneer. She looked ready to balk into the same distanced corner like Mahariel. “Camping near spider entrails. Wonderful.”

“Hey...” Mahariel startled upon his approach. Even as the others had settled down in a deserted cave nearby, away from the spider remains and webs, she kept her distance. “Sorry, didn’t want to spook you.”

“No, but you are invading my space nonetheless,” she replied with a scowl that made him reconsider his choice of approaching her. “What is this?” Mahariel pointed at a mug in Nithius’ hands.
“Elfruit tea? I thought you could use something warm and calming. I can mix something together too in order to help you sleep, should you wish it, lethallin.”

She turned away from him, leaning her back at the stonewall again. Closing her eyes, her shoulders sagged as she exhaled. “I think I could… use that. And the tea.”

Squatting down to her sitting height, he handed her the tea. “It is hot…” she murmured, frowning into the cup. “But we lack the wood for another campfire…”

“Mage, remember?” Nithius made a waving motion with his hands. “I don’t need a campfire to heat liquids.”

“Must be useful, that.” Mahariel took a careful sip. “I was never able to develop magic, to the disappointment of my clan.”

“Oh?” Closing the gap between them, he sat down next to her, his back flush against the rough wall of the cave. She was still covered in spider bits now dried on her pale skin. Needless to say, she stank. But other things were more important right now, like understanding the person behind the prickly exterior. It would be nice to get to know her, if for wholly other reasons than Alistair.

“Not that it matters now.” Her grip around the cup tightened. “Nothing matters here.”

“Well…” he drawled the word to a comical effect and laughed. It was fake, yeah, but if it helped her it was all that mattered. “For a ‘wild halla chase’, as you called it, we made good progress down here. The Dead Trenches are a real lead in regard of Branka and the Anvil.”

His humor had been too forced maybe, as it fell flat. Mahariel didn’t reply for a long while, instead stared of into the darkness only illuminated by the glowstones behind them. As an elf, the lack of light wasn’t much of a problem for him, nor should it for her. The problem was rather the oppressiveness of it around them here. Orzammar had no natural light as well, but utilizing the warmth and light of the lava surrounding the city to their advantage made up for its lack. No comparison to the Deep Roads where the taint was so thick he could smell at every corner. It was sickening and without his potion it would have been in a literal sense.

Her exhale came out stuttering, labored. She wiped at her eyes in haste and sniffed. “It should have been me.”

His head turned to her. “What?”

“Ruck.” Mahariel took three methodical sips from the tea, in order to be able to speak, to continue. “I was already tainted when I was recruited into the Wardens.” She paused and scoffed at her own words. “Recruited? Forced, more like.”

“You didn’t want –”

“No! And I don’t understand why you would freely give up your life for this…” She made a sweeping gesture. “…shit here!”

“I already told you, Mahariel.” Nithius let out a sigh. “My time in Orzammar is limited for various reasons.”

“Yes, but you could do anything. Anything but this. You are no Warden, not like me. You are free.”

“I’m a mage,” he stated, and bitterness crept into his voice. “I will never be free. Not of them,
unless I –“

“Bind yourself to the taint and darkspawn hive mind? Yeah, let me tell you that is severely overrated. It is shit and I hate it. All of it!”

He flinched back, the sudden ire of her unexpected. “Perhaps I do simply want to help people instead, and this without being struck down by templars for it.”

Mahariel scoffed. “That’s –“

… naive?”

“… idealistic, more like. You and puppy will get along just fine then.”

“...Puppy?”

She rolled her eyes. “Alistair.”

“Ah.” Nithius smiled a bit. What a nickname, yet fitting somehow. Especially for the way he hovered around her. “I wouldn’t mind it. He is a good guy.” Talking with him was indeed nice, although he had been too busy with himself lately. Understandably so, down here. The Deep Roads seemed to be even worse for Wardens.

“Yeah… he is.” She emptied the cup in a gulp as though not wanting to dwell on it and put it next to her down to the ground. “You were always bragging about having lived with my people, so why –“

Oh, this question was bound to happen, still the old hurt made anew with it hit him by surprise. His eyes squeezed shut. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

The back of Nithius’ head sagged against the cold stone, closed eyes directed toward the ceiling. “The templars found me there and –“ His voice cracked, stopped to function. Dammit!

“Oh...” Mahariel made a tiny noise in her throat, understood. “These assholes.”

“Yeah...” Trailing off, he struggled to swallow the lump in his throat, didn’t speak for a while, couldn't. “They were killed in the end by the hunters, but –“ He licked his lips. “The damage was already done. I was banished from the clan right after, of course.” So many lives lost due to him. If only he could turn back time. Even if it meant never to have met her… No. “I wasn’t even able to say goodbye to –“ He stopped. Mahariel didn’t need to know that. He also stilled his fingers that were playing with the amulet she gave to him, so long ago. A nervous tick, something he could never let go off, no matter how much time had passed. “That is why the Wardens are my best… my only option.”

“I see,” she said, her gasp audible. “Emma ir abalas, lethallan.”

There was a lilt to her words that her usage of the common tongue did not possess. And the first elvhen words that were not snide or an insult. “Ma serannas.”

“I hate humans. These high-and-mighty fuckers destroy everything they touch,” she stated, her tone cold and detached. “The same people my supposed duty is now to protect as a Warden, even when they treat me like a servant as soon I don’t wear my armor. So fuck that.”
Nithius suppressed his instinct to protest and defend some humans he got to know. Like Alistair. Or the bard, back in Orzammar. This wasn’t about them or a particular person, but more about expressing general frustration. “There are many innocents as well, who don’t have the opportunity or skill to defend themselves. We help them too in fighting the Blight, no?”

“Is being an idealistic idiot a requirement to become a spirit healer, or is it just you?”

“No, but it helps.” He laughed out loud, which was nice after not-so-pleasant memories. “You and Anders would get along well, I guess.”

“Anders?”

“The most smart-mouthed human I studied magic with in Kinloch Hold… Creators, nearly ten years ago, I think?” Chuckling, he shook his head. “You called me opportunistic, but one day he used the weekly outside exercise hour to make a break for it and jump into the Lake Calenhad. Due to their heavy armor, the templars could not follow, and so he swam for the shore and escaped. They caught him a week later, and all outside privileges for us were revoked indefinitely.”

“I see, but what makes you think I would get along with that shem?” She stretched her legs, let out a huff. “I already have to deal with a smart-mouthed human. I don’t need yet another, thanks.”

Ah, Alistair, yes. “Anders is, was, a bit of a rebel. Same as you, I guess?” Nithius paused to think. “I wonder what became of him, ever since I’d lost sight of him that day.”

“What… this shem did try to escape again?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “And that time young and impressionable me tagged along, since I always wanted to see the world outside the confines of the mage tower.”

“That too, is overrated. The outside world is shit, even without a Blight going on. Too many creator-damned shemlen who think their existence is their god’s given blessing to Thedas. And don’t get me started on the durgen’len and their sodding politics, ugh.”

“You are… not wrong here, lethallin.” Her sudden candidacy was new and amusing. “Although for someone so young, you are quiet jaded.”

Mahariel let out a snort. “Yeah, excuse me not rolling in laughter in this shithole here.”

That would be an unrealistic expectancy, indeed. “Touche. So, are you planning to return to your clan then, once it is all over?”

“I don’t know.” Her face fell, all dry humor gone. “I don’t think I will be able to, even if I survive.”

“Hmm.” His hum faded into a sigh as heavy as the pressure in his chest. “I know the feeling. No matter the hardship, the Dalish care for each other and for the ones they see as their own. I had the greatest privilege to gain their trust, to belong alongside these people for a few years.” To love and be loved by one of them. Nithius didn’t voice this thought. It seemed wrong, too personal. His throat tightened, made continuing difficult. “I… learned so much from them and it was the happiest time in my life. Perhaps this is why I cannot shut up about having lived with your people, I don’t know. I miss them, this sense of community and belonging.”

Mahariel was dead-silent next to him, frozen in place for a long moment. Then, her hands snapped up to her mouth to stifle the sob she could no longer control, or keep inside. Oh. Of course. How stupid of him. “Abalas, lethallin. I shouldn’t have –”
“No.” She shook her head as frantically as she wiped at her tears wetting her eyes and cheeks. “It was nice to hear… that someone thinks the same way.” Mahariel bit her gloved hand as another sob rocked through her.

Yeah, that hurt of loss wasn’t foreign to him either. He dragged the backside of his hand across his own eyes and the tears residing there. “Do you want me to mix you –“

“Yes, please,” she didn’t hesitate a second to reply, but also hid her face from him. Maker and the Creators, all of them, knew she could use some sleep that wasn’t torn by nightmares or wistful memories. When Nithius got back on his feet, he swayed a bit. Huh, the exhaustion must have caught up with him as well. Shaking his head, he stowed away the wish for rest for later, after he aided Mahariel. Hah, such a spirit healer line of thought, that.

The camp of the others were only a couple of steps away, just in another cave nearby. A quiet oppressiveness hung in the stuffy air and over the group. It was cold and dark, save for the couple of glowstones spread around them for light. Morrigan greeted him with her usual sneer as he arrived. Dried herbs and magic distiller were spread out in front of where she sat. “Oh, look who appeared after all. You can make your own anti-corruption potions then.”

“I will…” Nithius simply said, searching for his own herb satchel. He was not in the mood to fight with her again. “After I – Alistair can you move?”

“What?” The warrior had hunkered down in a corner, where also his satchel lay. Hopefully he hadn’t squashed the herbs entirely.

“Move! … Please. My bag.”

“Oh.” Alistair sprang to his feet and a pair of blades clattered on the ground. “Sorry.” Mahariel’s weapons reflected the sparse light opposite. He must have cleaned and even polished them as a by way of helping her. Perhaps even to keep his own thoughts and helplessness at bay. Either way, it was a nice gesture, almost too sweet. A good guy indeed. The Warden picked them up a bit awkwardly and sat back down, trying to make himself smaller than he was in bunching his shoulders. Which, of course did not work with a guy of his broad and tall build.

“I’m making a sleeping potion for Mahariel,” Nithius explained to him, for whatever reason. Not that he needed to know that. Sitting down, he checked on his poor satchel and its content. Thankfully he kept his equipment in another bag, so outside of the herbs being flattened further than they already had been, no damage had been done to it. The sleeping potion itself was an easy formula and natural remedy, nothing special. The magical enhancement would only make it more potent and ensure she’d have a deep, restful sleep. “I can do the same for you too, should you wish it...”

“I… –“ Alistair glanced up to him, conflict visible in his ever-easy-to read face. Probably for the best he did become a Warden instead of a politician. Orzammar would eat him alive. “...no. I will stay up. Keep watch.” His eyes gave away that he wanted to ask about his fellow Warden, with the way they flicked into the other cave’s direction. Instead, he reached behind him and brought forth a blanket. Alistair bunched it together and placed it in front of Nithius and the immaculate cleaned blades on top of it. “Please give her that. I want her to be safe, but –“ He made a few gestures with his hands, which replaced the words he couldn’t express.

“I will.” Nithius nodded and focused on finishing the potion for her. Unlike for Mahariel, sleep did not come easy to him later on.
Children Of The Elder God

Chapter Summary

The journey through the Deep Roads continues, and so does everyone, especially the two Wardens, having a bad time.

Chapter Notes

Shorter chapter, this time (for me, anyway) but it had a natural stopping point, so yeah. Next update is in a week then, due to that. Enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suledin.

It had become her mantra, down here.

Endure.

With each day passing and another mile walked without arriving anywhere, this became harder to do. Not when there was nothing but stones and taint and darkness beating down on her in each moment she breathed the stuffy, foul air. The nightmares were worse here too; writhing and screaming she awoke with them razing through every fiber of her body, each time anew. What point was there even in sleeping here? The exhaustion never went away, lingered and loomed over her like the oppressive, silent dark did. A wall of rock overhead and around her – everywhere – with nowhere to escape from it. Orzammar was bad, but it had wide and tall gates that led to outside. Here this was an impossibility.

Weeks, it would take to arrive at the Dead Trenches, but how by the Creators should she even measure time without light, air or the sky?

Nithius lay his hand on her shoulder and magic, warm like sunrays washed down her back, unknotting the tension there. The sensation wasn’t new, this sort of rejuvenation spell has been often used by her people, after a hunt. Magic was as much a gift as it was a tool like her weapons were. One had only to learn how to wield it properly. The shemlen’s fear of it was ridiculous and puzzling. “You okay?”

Lenya shook her head with a frown. That helped, but it didn’t make it better. Nothing short of returning to the surface could, to be honest. “Ma serannas,” she mumbled, focusing back on putting one foot in front of the other. To keep moving forward and going, no matter how huge the urge was to turn and run, away from all this.

Nithius smiled, understood and yet did not press further. After their talk weeks ago, well, she wouldn’t call him a friend per se… maybe something akin to that? Better not to label it prematurely, trusting someone else than herself would only lead to disaster and pain. Her past had shown her that well enough. “Say, Oghren,” the mage spoke up, focusing his attention to the
durgen'len leading their group. “What is the Anvil’s purpose? Why is Branka this obsessed with it?”

The durgen’len’s steps hitched and he huffed. “Because with it, Orzammar had a hundred years of peace, while it was protected by the golems forged on the Anvil. No one ever knew exactly how they were made.”

“Golems?” Shale gasped out, from behind them. “Made? Like me? Was I made here too?”

Down here, walking was the most dreadful part because everything looked the fucking same. Not only in the dark but in general. Rocks, rocks, rocks, chasm, taint, and oh – more rocks. Maybe this tunnel was less caved in than the one before. Big deal. Creators, with the last days and weeks having contained only walking Lenya almost wished for a darkspawn ambush. Yes, darkspawn were incredibly dull too with their stupid hissing and taint and always the same attacking pattern… but sinking her blades into these assholes was at least satisfying. Well, a conversation with the golem was better than nothing. “You don’t remember?”

“Hmph,” it made, sounding offended. “I traveled with the mage. He did a lot of traveling, I remember that, but where we went... it is rather fuzzy.”

“The mage?” Lenya slowed her pace to be at a walking level with the golem. “The one you killed?”

“Yes, yes, yes. It likes to repeat that I did this, doesn’t it? And I would do it again,” the golem huffed, balling its stony fists. “I’d had to leap to the little toadstool’s every command! Get this! Pick up that! Put it down! Pick it up again!”

“And in doing so he hit the “kill me” button by accident?” Her head snapped around to Alistair, prior silent at the rear of the group. Silent since days, maybe even weeks. Ever since she told him off in her blind fury, come to think about it. Damn, she never apologized for it either, as preoccupied as she was with herself and not to go insane. Maybe he was busy with that too, since they both got the special crap topping on the Deep Roads shitcake as Wardens.

“Oh, ho, ho, it does like to laugh, does it? But who knows? I may have such a thing.” Shale looked back, at him. “Why? Is the Warden Clown trying to find it?”

“No!” The word was released in between two long sighs. “No need for that. Down here are already enough things equipped with such a button.”

“I see. I’d still like to inform the Warden Clown that It does not need to search for it. I will crush Its head for free. Gladly.”

“Thank you, Shale.” Another, more annoyed sigh. “Very kind.”

“You know, I’ve seen a golem or two in my time,” the durgen'len said, his rough, deep voice echoed in the tunnel they were passing through. “We have them in Orzammar.”

“It is indeed so very wise in the ways of the golem. It deserves a medal.”

Ignoring its annoyed, sarcastic tone, he continued talking. Because ignoring everything from basic decency or hygiene to not being a gross little fucker leering at her, was what that durgen'len did best, after all. “Thing is, I don't remember anyone ever mentioning about them having memory problems.”

“Hmph, perhaps they are not the ones with the memory problems,” the golem retorted with a scoff.
“And I do remember some things. Great battles, fighting many humans, long ago. They were all very soft and squishy. Like the darkspawn here. Same odor too. Nothing as worse as The Dwarf, however.”

Lenya snorted at that. Being called a thing by Shale wasn’t something she appreciated, but its wit and – figuratively – sharp tongue? Oh Creators, it was a joy to behold. People – or creatures, in this case – challenging oneself were always less boring and more fun to be around with by default. Nothing put her faster to sleep than someone agreeing to everything in order to not offend. “I talked to a golem once. It didn't have anything interesting to say... But its memory? Sharp,” the durgen'len pressed on. What was that asshole hoping to achieve? Uncovering a great conspiracy involving Shale taking over Thedas? Ridiculous. “It could tell you what you were wearing at the Barnack festival ten years ago.”

“Probably vomit and flies and little else if I were to guess.”

The durgen’len threw her a peeved look for bursting out laughing at that. What? It wasn’t insulting if it was the truth. “Course if someone simply claimed to have lost their memory... That would avoid some awkward questions.”

Shale regarded him with the same disgust its tone expressed. “Is it still talking? It is not drinking, so it must be.”

Fine, fine,” he grumped, stroking his filthy beard. “You go on and don't answer me. You'll screw up sooner or later.” He turned back to Nithius, waited for the elf to catch up to him. ”To answer your question, boy, before the sodding pile of rocks interrupted everything... No, outside of Caridin, no one ever learned the Anvil's secret.”

“Caridin,” Shale chimed in. “This name is not unfamiliar to me.”

“So,” Nithius said, ignoring the golem. “You think it will be worth it, handing this kind of power to Orzammar’s new ruler?”

“Thoughts of mutiny? From you? Hah.” The durgen'len gave a shortling laugh. “As said, no one even knows how to create golems and what is involved. That craft has been long forgotten. But if Branka could recover it, Orzammar might finally drive the darkspawn back for good.”

Nithius hesitated, doubts lacing his words. “I see. It explains why Harrowmont and Bhelen seek her out then.”

“That it does, boy. That it does.” He heaved a sigh. “Took them only two years, and you Wardens prancing around to do so.” Stopping abruptly at an intersection, he raised his big head to, what, listen? Do stones really talk with durgen'len? It was… weird, but as long they arrived, well, anywhere, she couldn’t give much of a damn. “We are close. Another hour or two this way, at most. Better keep your weapons ready, may need ‘em.”

This hadn’t been an understatement, for once. The droning in her head increased with each step into the direction the durgen'len had pointed at. So did the nausea and the scratching at the back of her skull. Creators, what was going on? They were marching along a narrowed passage, lava fires glowed red and foreboding beneath the chasm.

"You...feel that?" Alistair’s head snapped around to his fellow Warden, staring at her wide-eyed. Darkspawn, obviously. But where and how many? This feeling it was overwhelming in its
intensity. "I – " Her voice refused to function. She frowned back at him. "How? The feeling is similar to my dreams...these fucking nightmares, rather. But I am not sleeping."

"Neither am I." Alistair gritted his teeth, willed his feet to keep moving forward. The chasm widened to a gorge in front of them. Only one way left to go: forward. "Great."

"The ground... it nearly shakes," Nithius’ voice shook as well, and his hands clawed around his staff like hers did around the hilt of her weapons. Lenya’s heart thrummed in her chest and ears, a rhythm akin to the dull, repeating sound down below. The air was foul, much more than before and it was their reek. The stench of darkspawn was piercing every bit of oxygen left, rotten flesh and thick taint. So thick she could barely breathe at all, and her mouth was dry like sandpaper. It made swallowing nigh impossible and hurtful. Dead Trenches. Yeah, it really lived up to its name, ugh. With each step toward the edge of the chasm, the pounding of the ground grew louder, as well. Everything in her screamed to turn and run, but her feet were rooted on the spot, refused to move either forwards or backwards.

"The bloody doors of Bownammar." The durgen'len pointed toward an shadowed area way ahead, across the chasms and gorge below. Due to the red glow there, the outlines of massive gates were recognizable. "I never thought I'd ever see these, you know?"

"Maker preserve us..." Alistair reached the edge of the chasm first and froze as he glanced down. "The lights... aren't from lava."

"Darkspawn!" Sten hissed through gritted teeth, drawing his two-handed sword. "Everywhere."

"Good!" Shale rushed forward and then stopped, even backing away a bit from the edge again. "It has to fight all of them?"

"What?" The golem’s uncharacteristically startled reaction pushed her into action again. Lenya trembled as she moved, the humming in her blood now a gruesome yet wonderful melody. It sang to her, filling her mind and body. The taste of taint burned upon her tongue, as much the air was permeated with it. The flickering lights below... were –

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit. SHIT! Her mind raced with that single word as hundreds, maybe thousands of darkspawn marched through the gorge, toward the surface. Nervous trembling morphed into tremors that rocked her body. She gasped for air, faster and faster, more shallow now. Her head swam, another, mightier presence palpable underneath the thrum of taint which paralyzed her in place. It was all-consuming, all-encompassing her being, gripping her heart and squeezed. Deep down, between the pain and the song, the identity of the presence became instant knowledge.

Archdemon.

A terrifying roar shattered upon earth and her ears. The hammering inside her chest, like a rabbit running for its skin, and the ringing in her ears became the only sound, along with the twisted song of taint. Beads of sweat trickled down her brow, as a colossal violet dragon ascended near them. Just like in her dreams, her worst nightmares. Her knees shook, nearly buckled as its presence drew out the light above them, replaced by shadows and darkness. Its enormous wings flapped as it soared high above, spewing lilac flames oozing death.

Lenya wasn’t herself anymore, threatened to vanish under its existence. The archdemon was in her head, in her blood, her whole being. She couldn’t move, every limb frozen stiff and the ice crept higher until it passed her mouth and nose. Her ribs heaved as if bound by ropes, there was no air, no air, no air! Each labored breath pushed through her constricted lungs caused her mind to slip...
further and further into blackness. Everything was spinning, the ground melting under her feet. But before Lenya could collapse she was scooped up and carried away by a frenzied tangle of arms and voices rushing away from its overwhelming presence. The song grew quieter again with distance reached in their flight. And still, still it didn’t fade completely, even when she blacked out.

Fingers clawed into the stone underneath as she stirred. The ground under her was solid, sobering.

"Hmph, there was a huge bird," said a voice next to her. Shale. The song was quiet again, but her ears still reverberated with its melody. They did escape then from… it? “Why did we run away from it? We should go back and kill it.”

"Go on foolish creature, and kill the archdemon. ‘Twill be a picture to behold."

"It was the archdemon, the swamp witch says? Mustn't the Wardens kill it to end the Blight? Then running away made even less sense." It scoffed. “Is it trying to protect the archdemon? Maybe the swamp witch is a darkspawn accomplice. It would fit to its never-ending yearning for power."

"Facing the archdemon with two indisposed and paralyzed Wardens, while underneath us marched a thousand darkspawns? My, such a brilliant idea, my dear golem. Not inane at all!" Lenya’s ears twitched as Morrigan groaned out, sarcasm laced every of her words. “But yes, you indeed have laid me bare. I confess: I'm a servant of the dark master, and now my evil plan is complete.”

She should get up, or at least open her eyes to show she was conscious again. Though every movement, no matter how little, drove a jolt of pain through her body. Her head pounded with a splitting headache keeping her tense and motionless. It hurt. Her whole being ached, sore as if having fought every of these bastards marching – Creators. How… how should they ever? “Fine, it is not a darkspawn accomplice, then. I will still be watching it, as it is not to be trusted.”

“How wonderful!” Morrigan made a frustrated sound at the back of her throat. “Now you're beginning to sound just like Alistair. Speaking of which…” A slapping sound resounded through the tunnel – or wherever they were now – and Alistair groaned out loud. “Wake up, fool.”

“Ouch!… W-what happened?” He shuddered. “Is the archdemon gone?”

“Yes, no thanks to you, though.” She paused to sigh. “Ugh, I should have let the archdemon swallow you whole, like you were aiming to be with gaping at it like a moron.”

"Is the Painted Warden dead? I did not squish it."

An armored hand gripped her shoulder and she stirred at the touch, however reluctantly. “Lenya...”

“Let me see –“ Nithius was quickly interrupted by another, much larger figure looming in front of her.

"Parshaara elf, here. I'm contented to part with it. There is an archdemon to hunt down and we have already wasted enough time." Her eyes fluttered open, as a rounded thing was shoved into her mouth. The light, as subdued as it was here, blinded her, and she had to blink several times to clear her sight. Bitting down on the food still stuck in her mouth, half of it crumbled down her armor. *Hmm, sweet.*
"You have ...cookies?" Alistair gasped out, shook his head. "From where? Was there a darkspawn baker I missed somewhere here?"

"There was a fat slovenly child back in Orzammar," he replied, not missing a beat. "I relieved him of them. He did not need more."

"Whoa, so you stole cookies... from a child?"

"It was for his own good." With a scoff, Sten turned toward herself, showing her the same amount of contempt like for her fellow Warden. "You are the leader. Start acting like one."

"Ar darthen." Lenya rubbed her face. "I...sorry. There are simply – " she trailed off with a grimace. Throwing herself down the chasm would be easier than the fucking entirety that just happened. This was impossible, insane. Always had been, but now it was so thousandfold. How much better would it be to end herself, before these hundreds or thousands of darkspawn had their shot at her and Alistair. The two of them against everything else? Yeah, whatever could go wrong with facing this endless machinery of mindless, tainted bodies ready to rip them in pieces? And the immortal old god whipping them forward in tune and order of the harrowing song still so clear in her head? No big deal at all! Child’s play. Fenedhis Lasa!

“Yeah…” Alistair breathed out the word in a shaky exhale. “I know.”

“Do not lament your duty, Warden. Act instead, as you are supposed to do."

“And then... do what, Sten, huh?” Oof, jumping up like that had been a mistake, as she struggled with vertigo upon the quick movement. No matter, the anger about the Qunari’s anew audacity burned brighter inside. “Fight the whole darkspawn army on my own?”

“Nah. We can share them fairly, Lenya,” Alistair said, his flippant tone belied by the laughter not reaching his eyes. He was as shaken as herself, but as always tried to humor his way out of it. “You take the five-hundred on the left side, and I take the five-hundred on the right side. And everyone gets a half a side of the archdemon to chew on.”

“The large, tainted bird is much more likely to chew on both of It.”

“Yes, thank you, Shale. Very helpful once again.”

“I don’t blame anyone for panicking a little... or much, after what we have seen,” Nithius said, flailing a bit as he gestured back and forth. Even his normally rock-solid, calm attitude had been perturbed. He was much paler than before too. Well, everything else would have been abnormal, to be honest. “But fighting each other does help even less right now.”

“Aye, boy...” The durgen'len squinted toward the chasm in the distance, left behind again in their flight. “Fear we gotta pass over the darkspawn-infested passage. There is no other way than that to reach Bownammar’s gates.”

“Great,” Morrigan sneered and crossed her arms. ‘Tis not as if the Wardens could be sensed by the horde, if we try to sneak past.”

“Amidst so many spawns?” He chortled in return. His amusement made no sense, given how they barely were able to escape an immortal god. Then again, nothing with this drunk made sense in the first place. “Hah, unlikely. The taint is so thick here, I could cut it with my axe.”

“Another reason why we should not linger.” Nithius frowned. “Not that I don’t trust my potions, but –”
“Yeah...” Standing up, Alistair squared his shoulders. False bravery, most likely, but the gesture was appreciated nonetheless. She wasn’t alone in this, at least. “Best to get going and it to be over with, then.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading my story/chapter update. Consider leaving a comment/kudos if you liked it. It would be most appreciated <3

Change Notes: I took some elements of the old version, like bits of banter afterwards and Lenya losing her nerves due to claustrophobia. Otherwise I rewrote the chapter to make it fitting to my current writing style and abilities.
The Sweet Escape

Chapter Summary

After running into the Legion Of The Dead and fighting at their side, the Wardens and their companions find very much needed R&R in their well-guarded campsite, however momentarily.

Chapter Notes

As promised, here the update after a week, to make up for the rather short chapter last time. :D Thanks so much for all your support so far and I hope you also enjoy this chapter and its surprise guest(s) here ;)

Oh and in case you are interested I made a playlist for this fic on Spotify

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_In the shadows out of sight_
_Like ghosts in ultraviolet_

_- Poets Of The Fall - The Sweet Escape_

The horde kept coming. They painted the ground in front of Bownammar's gates black with with their sheer number and taint, flooding in like the vermin they were.

Alistair widened his stance and put out his chest for better balance. Weapon in one hand and the shield in the other, he braced for the attack of a hurlock… which did not come. It was felled by two small twin axes belonging to an equally small dwarf with pigtails peeking through underneath her helmet. She even paused long enough to throw him a lopsided grin upon his confusion. “You gotta be quicker!”

He replied not with words but a stab way above her height as a shriek tried to claw its way into her head from above. The hideous creature wailed a final time before toppling over backwards. Well, no more wondering about why it was named this way, at least.

“Thanks.” Another smirk, even as she sank her weapons in a genlock stupid enough to approach her. She belonged to the Legion Of The Dead fighting the horde alongside his companions. After everything in the Deep Roads trying to kill them, their presence was a welcoming change. “Come here often?”

“I hope not...” Each word was accented by a bash of his shield. Bones cracked, yet it wasn’t enough to persuade the hurlock from attempting an attack nonetheless. Well, eventually, Alistair’s sword did. A couple of times, even.
“Aww, it is not so bad, really,” she said, ducking under two darkspawn swinging at her, and threw a fire bomb into a group of genlocks.

“Sigrun!” admonished another dwarf, close to the darkspawn-turned-torches. His broadsword was twice the size of the man and he used it to put out the fires around him. Literally. “Watch where you are throwing.”

“What?” She whirled around herself to take down the spawns pursuing her. It wasn’t as refined a motion as Lenya’s, but effective all the same. “I have hit them, didn’t I?”

Speaking of his fellow Warden, as misfortune wanted it, she had been pushed to the opposite corner of the area, along with Oghren and Morrigan. And while the line of the horde were thinned more and more by their combined effort, he had no way of reaching her. Finding Shale was easy, in comparison. He just had to follow the trail of ripped body parts and laughter. The green glow of its crystals did help too to differentiate it on the battlefield, of course.

“Wow, a golem!” The dwarf named Sigrun exclaimed in a gasp. Her fascination would be understandable, were it not in midst of cutting down a darkspawn horde.

“Another dwarf,” Shale retorted and turned a shriek into non-shrieking paste. “Lovely.”

“Did you hear?” Sigrun gasped anew and kicked a genlock square in the chest. “It called me lovely!”

“It has a name and you’d do well to use it.” Never mind her failing to grasp the golem’s sarcasm, calling Shale a thing was more dangerous to her life than all darkspawn here together. “Shale.”

“Seriously?” She giggled. Actually full on giggled, while beheading a genlock. Aside of it being terrifying, the golem and her would get along fine in this regard at least. “That name is adorable.”

“Yes...” Alistair emphasized his word with a stab into a hurlock’s gut. As it toppled to the ground after an additional bash with his shield, a flash of blond appeared in his vision. Oh good. She was okay. And by the looks of it also much less talking than his new oddly cheery friend here. “Can we maybe focus on...” He swung his sword, sending an arm holding a crude weapon flying. “…fighting first?”

“Can’t do both?” the dwarf gave him a shrug, alongside with a smirk. “Aww, pity.”

The battle went on for a felt eternity. It probably were only minutes, though did not lessen the cuts, and bruises now marring his skin in between the cracks of armor. Every bone in his body ached as if he were eighty instead of twenty. Maker, the urge to let himself fall down to the ground to rest was overwhelming, the pile of darkspawn bits and bodies there in spite. Alistair shook himself and sheathed his still bloody blade. Yeah, not happening.

“Good fight, Warden.” The same dwarf Sigrun nearly had set on fire addressed him now, and he was even gruffer and meaner looking up close. The scars crisscrossing his forhead disturbed the thick, black lines of his casteless tattoo. Fitting when your army was named after titular death, probably. “Name is Kardol, guess you are the one in charge?”

“I’m not –“ he tried to say and turned in search of Lenya. Nithius’ lean back was in the way, but the streak of blond underneath blackened blood covering much of her frame was telling. Wait, was she
hurt? Pale, blue light illuminated the distanced corner where she stood, indicating it being the case.

“Thought there were more of you, though.” Right, he still hadn’t replied to the dwarf, not really.

“I’m Alistair, and outside of my fellow Warden there...” He nodded into Lenya’s general direction. “There are no other Wardens left in Ferelden.”

Kardol mustered him from head to toe with a scoff. The dark ink framing his eyes made his glower even more intimidating. “Explains why they would send such a greenhorn down here, then. But still... everyone giving the stone-damned spawns a hard time is welcome in the Deep Roads, to us.”

“Sodding right,” agreed another, more fresh-faced dwarf in the same heavy set of armor. Unlike the bald commander, his hair was long and bound back in a ponytail. The lack of a beard was more unusual too, instead broad ink colored his cheeks black. “Glad you arrived when you did, Warden. Always nice to see a friendly face down here. Doesn’t happen too often.” On that, they could agree.

“Renn, get the injured mobile, we have to move on,” Kardol barked at the young man. “I’m sick of standing about in the darkspawn filth.”

“But the mage...” His protest was close to a whine. “He is not done healing them yet.”

“Mage?” The commander stepped forward, into Nithius’ direction. “What mage?”

“Colorful group, you got there...” Oh, her again. With a grin, Sigrun nudged him with her elbow. “Even disregarding the golem, I mean.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Alistair shrugged, too tired to really engage in a meaningful conversation. “With the Blight going on, we can’t afford to be choosy in regard of our companions. Aid is aid.”

“A Blight?” She exclaimed in such an eager way as if she was given a most expensive gift. “That would explains why the spawns are pushing toward the surface then. How exciting.”

Exciting would be the last words he would use to describe it. Terrifying. Impossible to beat. The shattering roar of the archdemon alone... Alistair stumbled backwards a bit, fought the remembrance of it and the song. Maker, help them.

“You old bastard... still alive, I see.”

“The commander and your mage friend know each other?”

What? Now it was his turn to express surprise in form of a gasp. Nithius and Kardol patted each other’s backs in a friendly, familiar manner. “No thanks to you. This time, anyway.” Letting go, Kardol’s laugh was throaty and boisterous. “Thanks for looking after my men, though.”

“Old habits die hard, I suppose,” the elf retorted with a half shrug and grin.

“Good to know.” The dwarf turned toward Lenya, standing close by. “And this has to be the other Warden.” He inclined his head toward her. “Well fought.”

“What? Did the griffon on my armor give me away?” Oh, she was, as always, her most diplomatic self. Not surly at all. Nope.

“No, your fellow Warden did. Still begs the question... why are you here?”

Before Alistair could close the distance between himself, Lenya and any possible knives coming
into play, Sigrun darted forward. “Oh, what are these tattoos in your face?” Maker, this woman had an inexhaustible amount of enthusiasm for everything and everyone. Normally admirable, but right now? Dangerous.

Lenya glowered at her. Oh, oh. “How about none of your business?”

“Just asking, because they look different from brands and I haven’t seen elves with –”

“Sigrun!” She winced a little upon her commander’s reprimand. “Go help Renn to round up everyone to leave. We make camp in a bit, but not here. Save your stories till then.” Sighing, he waited until the woman was gone, then turned back toward him and Lenya. “You are welcome to join us, Wardens, least I can do for fighting alongside of us. Maybe then you can finally explain what led you to this stone-forsaken place. You are too young to go to your Calling, after all.”

“We should move on too…” Lenya grimaced. “But we could use a break before doing so.”

“Good, then it is settled,” Kardol gave her a brisk nod, then proceeded to bark orders at the group, now less scattered through the efforts of the two legionnaire scouts. “Men, forward, move! Unless you want to take your rest and meal among these darkspawn corpses.” A few groaned out at the prospect of walking, but soon they were all moving toward a secluded cave, their companions included.

“So what brings you here, old friend?” Kardol took a sip from the flask that got shared around the fire. There were several small ones in the high-arched cave, not fueled by wood but coal. Thanks to Nithius, they were ignited as fast as the rest of camp was build up. It was nice how organized they were, every one of them had a certain task to fulfill, knew what to do. With their companions this was rarely the case, alas. “Last time I checked you were moving up in Orzammar, with your ass firmly planted next to Harrowmont.”

Nithius sat slumped over to warm his hands at the campfire. “Part of the reason why I am now here, with the Wardens.”

Or Warden, more like, since Lenya had excused herself to clean up. Alistair should do the same, once he was done polishing and sharpening his sword. The monotonous motion of it helped to root himself in the here and now instead to mire in fears newly stirred. He remained a silent listener to the elf’s explanation of their presence here in between the sounds of whetstone upon metal.

“We have to find Paragon Branka, to settle the dispute over the throne.”

The Legion around Nithius chuckled in disbelief. “Paragon Branka is dead, everyone with sense knows it.” Kardol pointed at a bridge still visible in the distance, leading to large, heavy gates. “Past our line, the darkspawn kill everything.”

How nice that this was exactly the direction they had to take, after resting. “Then we have to find proof of her demise,” Alistair spoke up, frustration lacing his voice in the same way it furled his guts. “Or anything that will make the nobles give us the troops we so desperately need to battle the Blight!” Even then it wouldn’t be enough, given the sheer numbers of darkspawn. No, better not to think about it.

"Ah… I see.” The commander made a noise of contempt back in his throat. “The deep lords in the Assembly can't make up their minds, so the pretenders need added... influence. Got your work cut
out for you there, Warden."

"Which is why we could use a little help here —"

"Bah!" His face twisted into a heavy glare, made more threatening through his tattoo and scorn. "The other kingdoms only care when the darkspawn march in the light. But they are always here, always pushing. A surge on the surface would reduce the pressure on us, for once."

Well, great. It was not as if seasoned fighter of darkspawn could add anything of value if they could only be bothered enough to help, nope. Perish the thought. "Not what I meant." Swallowing the other few choice words for the dwarf’s callousness in his mind, Alistair pointed at the distant gate.

"Oh, that." Kardol sighed. "Believe me, Warden… I'd be the first to lead an assault through the Dead Trenches, but without an ass on the throne, we have no orders. And I won't take fool's gold from a pretender."

“But you are safe here for the moment, so rest up,” Sigrun offered, picking up on the frustration mounting inside of him. “The stew should be ready soon too. And back there we got rune created water to clean yourself up.”

“Thanks.” The word came out more biting than intended. Alistair pinched his eyes with his unarmored hand, sick of it all. "I should probably do that."

He was alone at the three enchanted bowls placed in a row and behind a tall boulder, offering the illusion of privacy. Working methodically on the clasps of his armor, Alistair paused to flick his hand over a bowl and it filled with water, as if by magic. Well, technically it was. Or a very specialized enchantment, more like. Having freed himself from most armor parts piled at the side, and his sweaty, very sweaty gambeson, ugh, he began to rinse his skin with the water and soap reclaimed from his own backpack. Its temperature was chilling upon his heated skin and so he worked fast, repeating the rinsing again and again until the water stayed almost clear instead of the deep brownish red in the beginning. Maker, he would kill for a hot bath right now, to be completely clean for once, though this was as good as it would get in the Deep Roads, alas.

Shaking himself to stop the shivering induced by the cold water, Alistair slipped into the last fresh shirt left in his possession. Not that it mattered much, the stench of ichor and rot had permeated even into its clean fibers. Ugh. Best to throw it into a pile and burn it all, as soon as they were out of here. If they ever would get out of here, that was. Now that was a cheery, if not all unrealistic thought, given the sheer number disparity. Warden: Two, darkspawn: hundreds, if not thousands.

Laughter coming from the campsite too close by split through his beginning desperation with its easy camaraderie. That, right there, was part of the problem as well, wasn’t it? The sounds and sights of a large, battle-hardened group taking a break from fighting darkspawn, sharing tales, food and ale around the campfire. It all served as a reminder how much had been lost since Ostagar, and couldn't be replaced. It wasn’t just the number they lacked against the darkspawn… it was everything else too.

The faint glimmer of firelight splayed across the rough stone walls blurred as tears shot into his eyes. Why had he been saved and not Duncan? He would know what to do, unlike himself, in all his various inadequacies. The treaties for getting aid and troops… would it even be enough and feasible to face the darkspawn forces and the archdemon in particular? Tackling a plan step by step
was only of value if it would amount to something in the end. How stupid of him to cling to his duties, to believe he could undertake this impossible task, without Duncan and the other, more experienced Wardens guiding him.

Lenya was right: it was suicide, a certain death for both of them, if not for the whole of Ferelden. How should they ever – Alistair clasped his mouth with his hand, barely managing to stop the sob from escaping.

“Hey...”

The sudden voice startled him. Alistair hectically wiped at his eyes and sniffed before turning toward its source. There she stood in all her disheveled, half-dressed manner; his fellow Warden. While she still wore her armored leggings and boots, only a sparse breastband saved him from anew full frontal view. He still struggled to forget his first, very thorough one, much as he tried.

Alistair fixed a point in the distance, something that was not her chest or toned stomach and arms. “By Andraste... Lenya, please get dressed.”

“Pfft, I am, puppy. Figured if we are save from ambushes and keeping watch for a few hours, I seize the chance to get out of the stinking armor for once.” She scoffed. “Not that it helps much, all my clothes reek of taint, no matter what I do. Gotta throw them on a pile and burn them all. Only way to get the stench out.”

“And fight the darkspawn naked?” He swallowed audibly, that cursed picture reappearing in front of him. “Please don’t.”

“Does it matter, if I do?” Yes, I would die of a heart-attack, thank you. “Amounts to the same fucking success rate in the end, doesn’t it? Creators, I should have never stayed.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. We would indeed be better off if we were to run to Orlais and eating cake than...” He gestured wildly with both hands. “… this.”

Lenya still made no move to cover herself, thus he did the only sensible thing and handed her his own tunic. “Here, take it for the time being. It is clean. My last one, in fact.”

“That is nice, but still way too large. I hung mine to dry by the fire, after washing it. I just have to wait a bit, don’t worry.”

“That is not what I’m worried about...” It wasn’t only about him, but the other fifty to hundred people in the campsite on the other side of this boulder.

“Ugh, fine.” Lenya took it with a groan and the rustling of fabric ensued. “You humans are so finicky. There, done. Better?”

Oh no, he made it worse. Not only stood he now bare-chested in front of her, but she was wearing his shirt. His shirt! Maker! It sat askew, one shoulder was bared due to its too wide neckline and its length nearly reached down to her knees. The long sleeves covered all of her arms and then some. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” she swore, flapping them like a bird attempting and failing its first flight. “How do you fight in these?”

“They aren’t as long for me.” A smile bloomed on his lips, despite himself. How could he not, when she was adorable like that? While his infatuation with her was a bother and distracting, it was currently a welcomed one. Better than everything else here. “Let me help you, oh flapping damsel in distress.”
Closing the gap between them, she held still as he folded the sleeves up to a more elf-friendly length, one by one. The intimacy of that gesture only hit him once he was done, and his heart in his chest sped up, unbidden. “Thanks.” Lenya abruptly whirled away and steered toward a shadowed corner opposite. What? Did he offend her somehow? “Now sit down, join my pity party.”

Oh. “You… want my company?”

“Why not?” She heaved her bare shoulder to a shrug. “We haven’t talked in a long while and after all that shit today, I feel the need to.”

“Yeah, we haven’t, indeed,” he agreed, pressing his lips together. “I… didn’t want to bother you, is all.”

“You haven’t. …Mostly.” She looked up at him. “But sorry for snapping at you, weeks ago. It wasn’t fair of me.”

It was nice, hearing that. “It is alright, I understand wh –”

“Sit down,” Lenya repeated, more cross now. “My muscles already hurt, so I don’t need a crick in my neck as well, just because you are too tall for your own good.”

He complied with a chuckle. Amazing how she could lighten his mood with her mere presence, by being herself. “Some battle, huh?”

“Hmph,” she only made, poking him with a metallic item that turned out to be a flask. “Drink.”

“Oh...did you steal that alcohol from some Legion soldiers?”

No, Nithius has from that drunken durgen’len for weeks now, and I have been saving up what he diluted from him. For emergencies like these.” She made a face. “It tastes like ass, but –“

Alistair took a cautious sip. The sharpness upon his tongue burned within his mouth, and watered his eyes. He coughed. “What is this?”

“Told you.” She reclaimed the flask back from him for a way too adventurous sip. “Aaaaasss,” Lenya drawled the word while shaking her head repeatedly in disgust.

Alistair denied her anew offering of it. “How can someone drink this? Voluntarily?”

“Eh, I kinda get why that durgen’len would, especially after today. It helps to forget, I guess.”

“Yeah...” Leaning his head back, he looked up to the cave’s high ceiling, letting his gaze linger in its darkness. “I can’t get these pictures out of my head either. Worse than that was the… song. I still –”

“You heard it too?”

“Yes… it was the most jarring and most beautiful melody alike, all at the same time. I think this is what Ruck spoke of, and what Wardens hear when it is time to go to their Calling.”

“This shit is so fucked up, all of it.”

Despite the gravity of the matter, Alistair laughed out loud and her reaction was to blame. Or more like how she worded it. “Even during my months with the other Wardens, I have never met someone who is as foulmouthed as you.”
“Oh excuse me, your princeliness. But I’m no dainty shemlen-princess, who faints at the mere mention of a bad, bad word.”

“Now that would be dreadfully boring, if you were, wouldn't it?” He gave her a pointed look, arched an eyebrow. “I’m glad you are you, as I told you before.” Averting his gaze away from her, he stared straight ahead, his pulse racing. “I wouldn't want to have it any other way, cursing and all.”

Lenya exhaled, long and labored, as though releasing pent up tension. “That includes sitting in this shithole, sharing a thousand rotten bastards to battle with me?”

“Of course. Till the end.”

She let out the most undignified and yet fitting snort. “You are mad, human!”

“That makes two of us, doesn’t it?”

“I guess.” Her sigh faded into a small, resigning sound. “You sure running off to Orlais is no option?”

“Well, I heard they have lovely cake, if a bit frilly. The cheese there is a specialty too, but –”

“Yeah, duty to the Wardens, we have to stop the Blight, blah blah blah.”

“… but I prefer cake,” Alistair finished, grinning lopsided. “And yeah, also that, I fear.” As easy as it were to escape and leave Ferelden to its doomed fate, it also went against everything he stood for. Impossible as it were, he’d to least try to turn things around in whatever way he was able to, limitations notwithstanding. He owed Duncan that much, and more. If only –

“How?” The crack in her voice startled him. “How should we do this, huh?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I could distract the archdemon with the smell of my browned pants long enough for you to stab it dead?”

“Ew.” Her laugh devolved into a half-sob. Okay, the joke was bad, but not that bad, come on! “You know, I hate that gross durgen’len, but he saved my ass earlier.” Ah, this explained why Nithius was treating her then. Hopefully nothing serious. “And all because I took a wrong step and miscalculated an opponent’s movement. ‘s all it takes to fail, here or otherwise.”

“Yeah… but still, we have to try our best, at least, right?”

“I hate your unbridled optimism, puppy.”

“More than my bad jokes?”

“No. These are worse.”

“Aww…” He chuckled, probing further. “Worse than… being here?”

“Nothing is worse than this shithole. Venedis Lasa, I have been here underneath the rocks and within the darkness so long, I barely remember the sky anymore. And I hate it, I hate it so much.”

“Hmm… I know what you mean. It is hard to keep track of the time or days here. For all we know Leliana has already left for Orlais, thinking us dead.” How could he cheer her up, without reverting to bad jokes once more? Ah, yes, perhaps this would work. Alistair pointed upwards, squinted at the shadowed ceiling. “Look Lenya, the cloud, right there.”
"What –"

He turned his head sideways and squinted even harder. "See, it's shaped like a bunny!"

"– are you doing?"

"Oh come on. Where is your sense of adventure, your imagination? Maybe you need to lie down for it to work?" Standing up, Alistair lay back down in the middle of the cavern, his bare back flat upon the stone. “Like that!”

"This is foolishness,” she huffed, and still followed suit, next to him. Staring upwards like he did, she was silent for a bit. “...Obviously it is a nug, not a bunny."

Alistair looked at her then, perhaps a moment longer than really needed. She was awesome. This wasn’t news to him exactly, but her being silly with him… kind of was. His stomach made various somersaults and not of a puky kind. Quite the opposite, really. The feeling continued to spread like a warm wave all through his body, distractedly so. Alistair cleared his throat, focused back on their pretending game as much as it was possible. "Nonsense, why would there be nug clouds? Nugs only live in the Deep Roads and we're definitely not there!"

“Hmm, true, as the wide sky above us proofs,” she said it with the faintest snort, but for the most part kept her voice even and serious. “Maybe the light of dusk did confuse me.”

“Yes, you are right, the stars are already out. Behind the cloud that looks like a bunny.”

“Nah, the ears are too short for that,” she insisted. “It is totally a mabari!”

“Now you just make things up!” Alistair said with mock-offense, aware of the ridiculousness of that statement. Her head turned toward him and she burst into laughter, bright and clear. It was the sweetest reward possible, his silliness repaid tenfold. “But you know, once we are out here and back topside, maybe we coul–“

“There you are Wardens, I brought you –“ The voice stopped, but the person it belonged to remained rooted in place. Both of them sat up at once, in time to mirror her stare back at her in unison. It was the dwarf with the pigtails. Sigrun. “Oh, I didn’t know you both were… well, awkward!” She hastily put the two bowls of steaming food down on the ground. “I will simply leave this here. Enjoy the stew… and your company, as you already were, ahem.” Turning, she practically ran away. If the cavern would have had a door, she would have undoubtedly slammed it shut behind herself.

“What… just happened?”

Oh. Oh no. With him being half-naked and her wearing his shirt while lying down together, that dwarf had drawn some very obvious, though also false conclusions for herself. Maker. “I think she thinks we both were, you know…”

“We… what?” It took a second, then recognition lit within her face. “Ew. No. No way!”

Right, he should have expected that reaction from her, yet it still somewhat stung. Stowing the hurt away, he played along. “Yeah, imagine that! Perish the thought!”

Lenya sprang to her feet, seemed eager to put distance between them. “Wait here, my own shirt should be dry by now. So you can have yours back again.”

“Okay,” Alistair replied, already left behind by her with a sudden and far more heavier heart than
moments ago.

Chapter End Notes

Alistair got it baaad :D Credits for some lines regarding the pretend cloudgazing go to my dear friend dalish-ish. Thanks for playing sounding board for me. Oh, the chapter did not exist at all in the old version, aside of meeting Kardol and his men. So yeah, it is all newly written and meant to give the Wardens a small break from all the tragedy.

Consider leaving a comment and/or kudos if you enjoyed the chapter update and my story so far? Either way thanks so much for reading <3 See you next time... in the broodmother’s den :D
In A Perfect World

Chapter Summary

After a small respite, the Wardens and their companions travel into the Deep Roads to find Paragon Branka continues. Unfortunately in doing so, they find more than they wanted; things and secrets best left buried.

Chapter Notes

This is, um, a sucker-punch of a chapter, for too many reasons to count. Did take out a lot of me to write too. CW for body horror, since we are meeting the broodmother this chapter and more. So a strong stomach and not eating during reading is advisable here. See you on the other side of it. ... Enjoy?

Of all the places in Thedas, to meet Kardol down here in the Deep Roads had been most surprising. Which was silly, seeing he’d joined the Legion of the Dead years ago, however involuntarily. Of course his old friend would be here, battling darkspawn. Good to know he was making the most of his situation, now as commander of their forces.

“Soooo…. you and that durgen'len Kardol,” she drawled, her voice bouncing off the vast stone walls. “You seem to know each other well.”

Nithius paused, in order to renew the flare of light overhead and maybe to let Mahariel let catch up with him. “You make it sound like we were forbidden lovers.” He laughed and threw a quick glance at Alistair, now walking next to the Dalish rather than trotting behind like a beaten nug. The camp had been abuzz with rumors of them both pulling away, for a much more private time together. Amusing how even in the darkest corners of the earth, gossip prevailed and spread, and not even the most battle-hardened soldiers were immune against it. Whether it was true or not, was not up for him to decide. A bit of teasing couldn't hurt, though. “Star-crossed, even. Brought together by mere chance and yet destined to be.” Alistair's steps hitched as he desperately tried not to stumble. Oh, this was too easy.

“No, eww.” Alas, the implication flew over Mahariel’s head. She was sharp and observant, just not in all matters of life, it seemed. “I couldn't care less for your love life, lethallan.” Not the point, nor
his fault she took it so very literal. “I simply wondered about you knowing each other. It seems a bit odd.”

“We go way back. Years, in fact.” Nithius smirked, more to himself than toward Mahariel. Back then, Kardol had been still young and baby-faced. Well, as baby-faced someone from the Carta could have been, anyway. His intimidating brand, scars and scowl always had been there. The baldness and intricately braided beard though came later. “After I needed to leave The People, I ended up near Orzammar in my aimless flight. Found him passed out and bleeding in the rain, so I patched him up.” He paused, stroking his chin as if the words were hidden there. “Long story short, that is how I ended up in Orzammar and with the carta.”

“You…” Alistair’s voice unintentionally pitched higher. “… what?”

“Hah, friends in low and high places,” Oghren barked out a laugh and pointed right, at an intersection of tunnels. “You got around in Orzammar. Smart.”

“Pretty much, though most of it wasn’t by choice but happenstance. The carta offered protection from the templars, but the life of crime wasn’t for me. However, Kardol and I remained friends while I sought out alternatives over the years.”

Mahariel scowled, her tone harsh. “Like now… with us?”

Ah, maybe he worded that wrongly. No wonder she took offense. “It is simply how things are in Orzammar. You either swim or sink, nothing personal.”

“Spoken like a true sodding deep lord...”

He ignored the dwarf’s biting comment. “This here, to help you all, I have chosen.”

“Yeah, boy. After Harrowmont told you to...”

Oghren’s resentment for nobility was understandable, after everything that happened to him. Some of it had been his own making, more so… not. “This fact doesn’t change the direction I am intent to go. And with you finally being here, after two years of pleading with the assembly and others, I thought you’d understand.”

“Glad to be here, to finally do something, yeah.” His dark eyes narrowed upon him. “But no need to go mushy on me, elf. Save that for your lord.”

"There is one thing I have been wondering all these weeks of our search for Branka,” Alistair spoke up. “Why aren't you with her in the first place? You are her husband after all.”

"Heh, have you ever been married, Warden?"

"No, of course not! It was never –“ His words faltered as he shook his head. “How even? I’m only twenty and before becoming a Warden I grew up in the Chantry. They don’t exactly raise the boys there to become skirt-chasing womanizer, you know?"

"Good on you, boy. Thank the hardest stone you can find. Marriage is for suckers."

“That is a very jaded view on it,” he protested, hands raised. “To spend one’s life with the person you love sounds... wonderful.” There was a longing in the Warden's voice, a softness he perhaps was not aware of himself.

“Figures the idiot would romanticize the concept of tying oneself to another with bonds of
servitude!"

Morrigan was a peculiar woman. Keen in all regards, an intellect and tongue as sharp as a razor’s edge and just as cutting. Her cold beauty and demeanor only added to her mystique and attraction, of which she was well aware. “Ah, don’t you want little Morrigans running about someday? The pitter-pat of little feet?”

“Why?” She clicked her tongue, regarded him with cool annoyance. “A man might be needed to create a child, but not to raise them. Thus a bond with someone else beyond that serves no purpose. Love is foolish, a weak, simpering notion.”

"Hah, spoken well, witchy,” Oghren agreed, his voice edged with bitterness. “Because all I ever got out of that moss-licker was a headache, a deaf ear, a scratched-up back and that rash it took three different ointments to get rid of.” Relenting with a sigh, his voice grew more quiet, almost sad. “If I'd been with her, she'd have made it back years ago. It was a stupid move to run off with our entire house, but I forgive her.”

Huh. He still loved Branka, despite his prior scathing words and everything that happened. “I see, that’s—" Turning a corner, rotten, pungent smell of flesh hit Nithius like a wall and he nearly stumbled backwards at its intensity. The reek was far more foul than even the presence of darkspawn induced.

"First day they come, and catch everyone."

What was that? There was a faint voice in the distance, but the words escaped him. Maybe it had been just his imagination. The incessant darkness was bound to leave an effect on one’s mind, sooner or later. “Are you sure this is the correct way, Oghren?” The narrowed, winding tunnel already went on for miles and an end to it was not in sight yet. Round rocks cluttered at each side of the walls that were webbed with… something. Nithius kept the hand not carrying his staff pressed flat to his side. Better not to touch… that.

“Yes, and whatever you smell, it wasn’t me, this time.” He poked the Qunari's back with the backside of his axe. “Stand up to it, you giant ass! You've birthed a cloud to be proud of!” Sten let out an exasperated sigh, stopping briefly to turn and glowered down at him. The dwarf chortled and fanned his face with a gloved hand. “Whew, I hope you’ve thought of a name.”

"Second day they beat us and eat some for meat."

There, it was again. Not his imagination, after all. Nithius paused, straining his ears, though as quick as the voice came, it vanished again. Very odd.

"Ugh, with this excruciating stench lingering here,” Alistair said, suppressing a gag.”… it is no surprise no one has entered this place for five-hundred years.”

"Except for Branka. I think we are close to finding her."

"I am still unconvinced regarding this matter, dwarf!” Morrigan’s scoff from the rear of the group echoed through the tunnel. “But ‘tis a strange atmosphere here, this is true.” Murmuring a few words under her breath, her staff flared up brighter, pushing the shadows further back. She’d used a more sophisticated light spell that was more exhausting to keep up than his own. This turned out to be a mistake. Sometimes it was better to not have a clear view of the surroundings, of the texture of the wall and the round stone that were not – No, no, no. Too much, too disgusting. He’d seen many things in his time as a healer, but that? No one should ever come across rotten deep red tendrils snaking along the wall and –
"Huh, it appears to be a bag of flesh," the golem said, probing one round not-stone with its massive feet, then shrugged. “Then again, all non-golems look like that to me.”

“Third day, the men are all gnawed on again.”

“Stop that, Shale!”

“I did not speak, Painted Warden Elf!” the creature protested, the crystals set into its stony skin enveloped the edges of the wall, the flesh webbed there, in a green, eerie hue.

“Fourth day, we wait and fear for our fate.”

Nithius froze. “No, it hadn’t been the golem.” He turned toward Mahariel, the only other member in their group with enhanced hearing. “Tell me you heard that too!” *Tell me I am not going insane!*

“Yessss.” The word of admission was spoken in between a tremble. “I thought I was imagining it, though.”

Alistair exhaled raggedly. “Heard... what?”

“Fifth day, they return and it's another girl's turn.”

“That!” Trembling, Nithius accelerated his steps, but that would only lead toward its source, not away, right? Oh Maker and Creators, all of them, what would wait for them at the end of the tunnel?

“Good!” The golem adjusted to his added speed with heavy steps of its own. “We should hurry to squish the pesky poet!”

“Or run into the opposite direction?”

“Good plan, fool!” Morrigan sneered. “Let’s undo all the progress made in the past hours and return to where we started.”

“Better than —“

“Sixth day, her screams we hear in our dreams.”

“– this!” Alistair bit back a shudder and yet it reverberated deep in Nithius’ own bones. “Oh, no, no, no. I don’t like this!”

“Pull yourself together, Warden!” Tensing, the Qunari drew his weapon and rushed toward the intersection up ahead. Nithius threw a questioning glance toward Mahariel over his shoulder, but she only shrugged. Together they broke into a sprint to catch up with their companion. “Empty,” Sten stated, poking the cold ashes of the fireplace with his giant sword. It was a darkspawn camp, but one long abandoned.

“Oh, so that is not where this presence of taint comes from?” Lenya scratched the back of her head – not like one would scratch an itchy spot, but one that ached, hurt. “I’m unable to discern what it is or where it comes from and it is driving me crazy!”

“Seventh day, she grew as in her mouth they spew.”

“Well, the sodding voice comes from that direction!” Oghren pointed toward a rusty, old door at the left side of the winding tunnel. No one moved.
"They…” Morrigan squinted toward the door and slanted her head to the side, as if trying to make sense of it. “I think darkspawn are meant by it."

"Well, darkspawn are, ugh, eating people they capture … but spewing in their mouths? That makes no sense," Alistair said and shook his head. "Best we are ready for anything." With a glance toward his fellow Warden, he readied his sword and shield, taking charge with trembling knees. Or it was just his own knees that trembled. This was hard to distinguish in the persisting moment of trepidation stretching further and further until it gripped his heart, squeezing.

"Eighth day, we hated as she is violated."

Mahariel rattled at the door and its rusty hinges creaked, protesting against her intent to open it. “Shale?”

“Ugh, fine…” The creature’s weighty steps scuffed across the rough ground, piercing through his own cloud of panic rising further upwards to constrict his throat. The rang of steel disturbed the stillness, leaden with uncertain anxiety, as everyone freed their weapons. Stepping aside to make way for the golem, the grip around his staff tightened.

"Ninth day, she grins and devours her kin."

The voice, the inane, detached mumble within the chant never paused, as if needing to finish it before they could reach the person… – thing on the other side. Thankfully, the discordant, deafening screech of metal giving way to Shale’s sheer force of fist drowned it out for a few blissful moments.

Even before the dust had settled, they darted forward, ready to slay what lurked in the shadows beyond the door. There was no one, though. No deformed, enormous beast to fight that would have given a face to the horror mounting in their hearts and minds. The large room was dark and empty, save for the clumps of red, fleshy sacks arrayed in a haphazard line at the side. No surprise the sweetly cloying stench of decay was worse here.

Nithius bit back his bile and repeated the spell Morrigan had used earlier. Light flooded the room, giving away its vastness and something crouching in the opposite corner.

"Now she does feast, as she's become the beast."

It was definitely the creature – person who recited this twisted chant. Nithius shared a few unsure looks with the others, but no one dared to move forward. The voice had stopped too, and as such their agitated breathing became the only sound within this creeping silence.

"First day they come and catch everyone."

The Qunari groaned out. “Parshaara, this is ridiculous!” With two, three quick strides, he crossed the hall toward the shadowed creature looming there. Nithius stared after him and his light spell sputtered, then faded, his concentration lost. Following the Qunari toward… it already cost him all of his energy and will.

The person turned toward them, their –her – movements all ponderous, unnaturally slow. Her pale face was covered in dark blotches, puffy and swollen, like the other dwarf they’d met, weeks ago.
Ruck. Creators help him, everything in him screamed to turn and run, away from that memory and the atrocious smell coming from that dwarf in front of them. Taint and rot, like a decaying corpse, as if she had already been dead for a long time. And yet she stood here, her hollow and milky eyes mustering him and Mahariel in disbelief. "What is this? Elves? Exotic and impossible." She spoke louder now, but the inane murmur within lingered, sent shivers down his spine. "Feeding time brings only kin and clan. I'm cruel to myself. You are a dream of strangers' faces and open doors."

Oghren hesitantly stepped forward, his voice was quiet, cracking. "H-Hespith?"

Alistair's head snapped toward the dwarf, wide-eyed like a child. "Wait… you know her?"

He shrugged, almost apologetic. "Her voice sounded familiar to me, but I wasn't sure until we were closer. It's been two yea – " the dwarf stopped halfway, eyes narrowing upon the tainted woman. "By the ancestors, what has happened to you? What is that chant?"

A sad smile appeared on her cracked, half-rotten lips, hollow eyes unfocused. "It's what I've seen. What I will become. I force it into verse so it is fantasy, unreal. That's the only place I can hide, because they make me... they make me eat. And then..." Faltering, her fingers dug deeply into her filthy strands of hair. She frantically shook her head. "No, no, no, not to think of it."

"This is darkspawn corruption, but it looks so... different," Alistair murmured, all breathy and shocked. "What is happening? What are these things she is speaking of?" He sought answers with his gaze at himself and his fellow Warden, but no one here could give them to the Warden. Mahariel was wound tight as a bow, stumbled backwards. Both Wardens were out of their depth, severely unsettled by the events like the rest of them. Nithius stepped back, reached out to her, if only to stop her from bolting into the darkness. Who knew what lingered beyond here?

Mahariel swatted his hand away, but still. For now. Given the dwarf’s condition, it was probably useless to ask, but as a healer, he had to offer, to try. "Is there something we can do...to help you?"

"No, no, no, you cannot! There's nothing left. There's body and there's hope, and both are turning."

Hespith let her blotched hands fall sideways, hunched over and into herself. "They come. They vomit, they violate, and they chant. They scream, oh, how they scream... Then the change comes."

Morrigan let out a frustrated noise. "This makes no sense. Tis a waste of time standing here, listening to an inane dwarf, driven mad by the taint."

"All I could do was wish Laryn went first," Hespith continued, staring blankly ahead. "I wished it upon her so that I would be spared. But I had to watch. I had to see the change. … How do you endure that?"

"What changes do you mean, Hespith?" Oghren’s voice cracked. "Where is Branka?"

"D-do not talk of Branka, of what she did!" she snapped, before adding in a whisper, “Ancestors preserve us, forgive me. I was her captain and I didn't stop her. Her lover, and I could not turn her. Forgive her...” Hespith shook her head. “… but no, she cannot be forgiven. Not for what she did. Not for what she has become."

Cocking an eyebrow, the witch looked back at Oghren. Her pale features were even harsher as they twisted to a smirk under the faint magelight. "Shall I act surprised now that your wife has turned to her own gender, despite having such a great man such as yourself?" She paused, feigned thinking. "No, I guess it isn't worth the effort."

For a brief moment, the dwarf staggered as if he had been hit by a weapon. Then, he shook himself.
"Well, that explains much. I could have made some arrangements… if I had known her taste, though." Grappling for his flask as anchor, he took a long swig out of it, and grimaced. "Sodding woman!"

Hespith turned to Nithius and Mahariel, the expression in her blotched face etched with sadness."There is too much darkness here, dream-friends. The Anvil, it is surrounded by it, pulling Branka in. She became obsessed. That is the word, but it is not strong enough. It consumed her, changed her!"

The hushed words struck deep, hinted at the horror beyond, at Branka being responsible for it all. So much was yet unclear, the tainted dwarf’s asinine rambling without sense and direction, like a fever dream. Alas, they were all so very wide awake. Beside him, Mahariel grew taut once more, akin to an animal ready to attack. She jolted forward not a moment later, her voice loud and shaking like the rest of her body. "What did she do? Tell me or stay here!"

Backing away, Hespith’s milky eyes grew wide in horror. "No! Don’t leave me here! Don’t let them take me! Don’t let them turn me!"

"Then tell me where Branka is!"

"I… I will not speak of her! What she did… of what we have become! I will not turn!" Hespith mirrored Mahariel’s outrage, her hands clawing at her ears as she rocked back and forth. "I will not become what I have seen! Not Laryn! Not… Branka!" She pushed through the group and fled into the darkness with a suddenness that caught everyone off-guard. Then everything went quiet. For a few shaky breaths, no one spoke a word, hearts and mind racing in fear.

“Alistair…” Mahariel still trembled like leaves scattered into too many directions. Her voice was so small, wrapping around his name like brittle shards of glass. “What is happening?"

The Warden bit back a shudder of his own and moved toward her, his bulk a solid wall shielding her. His gauntleted hand reached up to her, before withdrawing again. Nithius’ heart sank at the display of helplessness from both of them. The two last Wardens of Ferelden were right now more like frightened children lost in the dark; too young to fight this war and witness its atrocities. “I don’t know.”

“I… will talk to Kardol again,” Nithius said, his nerves aflutter. “I’m certain he can be persuaded to lend us his legion’s aid in this Blight, against the archdemon and its army.” His comment was so out of place, but it was all he could do to help, magic aside. Maker knew, they would need it, after everything they’d seen and experienced in the Deep Roads. Unfortunately, this here was long not the end.

"This is insignificant," the Qunari stated, peering into the darkness. "We should follow this creature to find the person we seek."

“Yes,” Alistair nodded weakly. “Though I don’t look forward to find her, and whatever else is waiting for us there.”

Neither did Nithius.

"...Hespith...was from Branka’s house, a cousin from her family,” Oghren muttered to no one in
particular, as they marched down yet another hallway. The darkspawn encountered on their chase for Hespith were a mere afterthought, nearly a relief from the terror holding them in its iron grip. "Branka would never hurt her. Something else… must have done that to her and remade her into this thing. Branka will be able to explain this if we find her, just you wait."

Nithius threw him a withering look that softened into pity. He was in denial in regards of his wife, perhaps had been for a long time. This reaction, his urge to defend her was as such only natural, though not less tragic and misguided, of course.

Bownammar’s corridors of yesteryear became a blur, narrowed and extended in regular intervals as their structure changed. They all had an eerie silence in common, this complete lack of sound, save for their own footsteps. And the sensation of being watched from a distance.

“The men, they kill, they are merciful. But the women they want. They want to touch, to mold, to change until you are filled with them,” Hespith’s voice tore through the tense stillness, seconded Nithius’ feelings of discomfort. “They took Laryn. They made her eat the others, our friends. She tore off her husbands face and drank his blood.”

"'Tis most disturbing." Morrigan’s shudder came as a surprise. Not as much her disgust, but that she chose to show it openly. Like Mahariel, she was a private person and very picky as to what to reveal about herself. Nithius knew very little about her, in fact. Perhaps this could change after the Deep Roads. He’d like that.

"Oh, I can't wait how your lovely wife is explaining that!" Lenya snapped, glaring back at Oghren, walking far behind her. He’d stopped leading their group a long while ago, could hardly keep up with them now. "You have seen her, asshole! Hespith is tainted… deformed, even. There is no excuse for this. If Branka is responsible for it, I'll kill her. Troops or not."

Oghren scowled back at her. “You have to go through me for that!”

Her laugh bounced off the filthy walls, bitter and challenging. “Gladly.”

“Lenya…” Alistair walked very closely to her since meeting Hespith, as though seeking comfort and attempting to give it alike without touch. He’d even accommodated his speed and wide of steps to Mahariel.

“What?” Her ire shifted to him and his steps hitched, however briefly. “Do tell me I’m wrong, I dare you!”

"No, you aren’t.” He shook his head. “But d-do you feel that?"

Mahariel paused to focus, squinted into the distance. Alistair did the same. His current, complete synchronicity with her would be amusing, were it not for their situation at hand.

Morrigan groaned at the well-known, stilled posture of both Wardens. "Great, more darkspawn?"

"Maybe it is just Hespith?" Nithius offered. “She is tainted and has been watching our progress the whole time.”

"No," Alistair’s brows knitted into a deep frown. "It is...different. Much stronger." He pointed at the dark tunnel up ahead. "And coming from this direction. Whatever it is, we will meet it sooner or later."

"Ugh, how about never?" Scoffing, she rolled her eyes. "But of course, can’t have that, right?"
She wasn’t alone, they were in this together. Maybe she needed to hear it. “Bel dar'an.” Nithius stumbled a bit over the pronunciation due to his frayed nerves. “Vir Adahlen, Mahariel.”

“Yeah, tell that to my head which feels like exploding any moment now!” She acquiesced with a sigh. “Ma serannas, lethallan. For trying. But no words can –”

“And while she ate, she grew.” He jumped at Hespith’s voice echoing through the narrow passage again, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. They, however, seemed to be funneled along toward a certain direction, to meet whatever was waiting for them there. Creators, it was as if they were led to their impending slaughter. Nithius renewed his magical wisp of light to illuminate the path ahead. The passage was jet black, no natural light broke through the cracked ceiling, which was perfect to hide whatever had taken refuge within it. Ugh, how lovely, just what he needed.

Mahariel sneered. "And here I thought she’d finally shut up…” He inched closer to the middle of the corridor, almost huddled up with the Wardens up front. The growth along the walls which had lessened considerably during their haste through Bownammar’s ancient corridors had returned, stronger and thicker than ever. Perhaps it was only the lack of light, but the red tendrils even seemed to… pulsate? And every few feet, there was a swelling, not only at the side, but scattered amidst the path as well. Unlike the rotten fleshy sacks encountered before, these were not burst, nor empty. They were bigger too, and under the nearly translucent membrane, a shape stretched and moved within dark fluid.

“Morrigan?” Nithius stopped to fall in line with her further back. The words stuck in his throat as the sack ripped open with a sickened squelch and a glistening arm protruded from it. It gripped the witch’s leg, and pulled her toward itself. Being caught off-balance, Morrigan fell to the ground, letting out a very uncharacteristically shriek. Shit, shit, shit. It was moments like these where having any kind of ability in offensive spells would be sodding useful. But nooooo, he had to focus on herbalism instead!

Rushing to her side, Nithius repeatedly whacked the creature rising with his staff, but the witch recovered quickly from her shock and sent a flame flying its way. Large enough to free herself, not enough to kill the nearly fully emerged… genlock? Oh. Oh, no. The golem stomped on it and it made a wet, popping sound, bathing Morrigan in its gory ooze. She stood up and shook herself in disgust, slime and black blood all over her frame. “I hate this place!”

There were footsteps behind them, most likely the Wardens returning after having unknowingly progressed further on their own.

“On that, at least, we can agree,” Alistair said with a grimace, using his torch to burn the remainder of the sac.

“She swelled and turned grey and she smelled like them. They remade her into their image.” Hespith’s voice echoed louder and foreboding through the pitch-black passage. “And then she made more of them.”

Oh. Oh, no. Suddenly everything fell into place, but as a jarring note in a melody or the last ingredient for a potion turning it into poison. “Have you ever wondered how there are so many darkspawn?” If this sac was a womb, a sort of gestation… was there a mother? “H-how they are made?” Nithius pointed at another fleshy sac with a shadowed figure within.

“Broodmother…” Hespith intoned from afar, as if in reply to his question.

Alistair peered up, squinted into the darkness and direction of the voice. “Great, I will never be sleeping again.” A shudder. “And here I was enjoying naps.” Mahariel stood grim and motionless
next to him, staring at the sac he’d pointed at. Then she stormed forward, pushing her fellow Warden and himself aside to stab it with both of her blades.

“Morrigan!” Despite her predicament, the witch snapped to attention. “Burn them! Burn them all.”

“Darkspawn,” growled the Qunari, and hacked away at the womb… eggs. A wet squelch filled the silence as the now lifeless bodies fell out of their membrane casing. How many were there? Steel and fire ended those in reach, at least. But if there was a mother… –

"We are close!" Mahariel shielded her face with her armored arm against the fetid reek piercing every corner of the cavern. Though the smoke and smell of pungent burned flesh did only add to her and his own nausea. She gagged, swallowed with some difficulties, only to double over to vomit on the ground.

The dried bit of clove he chewed on prevented Nithius from following suit, by a slim margin. Maybe it could help Mahariel too. “Here…” He quickly found what he was looking for in his herb satchel. It paid off to always have some of them ready to use, down here. “Keep that in your mouth, chew a little when needed, but do not swallow it at once.”

“Fuuuuuck!” she swore, her knees wobbly as she took what he offered. Before putting the dried herb in her mouth, she took a swig from her water skein to rinse her mouth. “Ugh, cloves, I hate the taste. But better than… –“

“For what it is worth, Missy,” Oghren drank a mouthful of his own flask, perhaps to calm his own upset stomach. “Ya won’t be barfing at whatever is waiting for us in its lair, when nuthin’ is left to be barfed out!”

“Oh, look,” Shale snorted. “It speaks from experience!”

“Tis fairly obvious by now what it is, dwarf!” Morrigan sneered, her poise as haughty as ever, despite her sullied appearance. “All around us, are these disgusting darkspawn wombs…” She left the sentence hanging, its implication leaden and clear.

“Are you saying there is… a mother in the lair ahead?”

“Unbelievable, you are capable to put two and two together after all. How remarkable of you, Alistair!”

“Thank – Hey!”

“Um…” Mahariel went scouting ahead, probably to escape the worst of the stench here. But now she stood frozen where the blind turn of the tunnel ended. “I… think I have found that other durgen’len Hespith spoke about.” She ran back to join the others, eyes wild. “Fuck! Everyone, stick together. This will be… fuck! Fuck. Fuck!”

“What are you talking about, woman?” Wet, sloshing noises pierced through the silence and Oghren’s question. The dwarf blinked. Once, twice. “You mean… Laryn?”

“Stay with the mages, this will –“ Mahariel licked her lips, didn’t reply. The hands on her blades shook. “Mythal’enaste, venavis. Fen’Harel’s balls!” More elvhen curses fell quietly from her lips, swallowed up by Hespith’s words once more.

"That's why they hate us... That's why they need us, take us... and feed us.”

Rushing closer to the cavern lying ahead, even the peppermint oil smeared underneath his nose
could no longer stave off the sour, putrefying stench churning his stomach. It was akin to feces and rotten eggs mixed together, reeking like the always clogged sewer in the alienage of his childhood. The one at the corner with the butcher shop, where blood and fleshy rot coagulated in it to a putrid mass. Not the best memory, mildly put.

“But the true abomination... is not that it occurred, but that it was allowed.”

The tainted dwarf was there too, ever-waiting for their arrival. She must stand somewhere high up, since her figure cast long shadows at the wall to their left and –

Alistair froze and stared when the long, winding turn gave way to the cavern at last. “Maker… this –“ Yeah, this was definitely not Hespith, nor her shadows. But –

“By the Ancestors…” Even Oghren was at a loss for words, which was more than alarming. Not that Nithius could blame him. Words were inadequate to describe the creature, the horror given name and form by Hespith.

Broodmother.

The closest that came to mind was how back in the Circle, Anders had scribbled a less than flattering drawing of their stern-faced healing instructor Wynne into one of the herb-lore books. She had been portrayed as an unshapely, gray blob of a woman, with teeth so sharp and long they protruded from her mouth to mock her constant nagging during lessons. It had been nothing more than an outrageous caricature done by an immature mind in anger, and yet now… with the sight on the creature looming in the back of the cavern, it still was a vast understatement.

The drawing neither had various tentacles moving about sluggishly without a recognizable rhythm or pattern. Nor the glistening film of sludge sheeting the entire ground of the cavern. It seemed to ooze from some unseen orifice of the creature, which explained the reek of waste and decay. Nithius suppressed a gag as bile rose in his throat. Alienage sewage, indeed.

Imposing in size and mass, its distorted head was tiny in comparison, teeth razor-sharp within a lipless, rotten mouth. The creature's purple skin was grainy and slimy, bloated by fat and stretched to bursting. Like a snail, the slime coated the broodmother’s bulging mass of gray and twin rows of sagging teats. A clear fluid leaked from it, trickling down its cascading rolls of putrid flesh.

Was this how she – it – fed the hordes? Or did they feed it? They had to, since the creature was stationary, made immobile by its sheer dimension and fat. Awash in its own filth, it wasn’t able to do anything but eat and reproduce, to create new darkspawn bringing death and corruption topside.

“Last time I saw Laryn…” Oghren’s breathing was labored, even he fought with nausea. “… she looked much better.”

“Any… plan?” Alistair’s voice wasn’t more than a whisper as he leaned in to Mahariel.

“Fire. Lots of fire. Still got one or two bombs left, but…” She turned around to Morrigan, who sighed.

“Understood.” The witch nestled at her belt and uncorked a lyrium vial to drink it. Oh right, he should do the same. Searching for his own lyrium reserves, Nithius’ eyes caught Hespith, standing high above on a cliff looming over the cavern. That was where she had been the whole time, then. Their eyes met, there was a sad smile on her half-rotten lips.

“The Stone has punished me, dream friend,” she said, almost too low for him to hear. “I am dying of something worse than death. … Betrayal!” Time seemed to slow as she turned and jumped down
from the opposite edge. No! The impact of her body was swallowed up by the broodmother’s near
dreadful scream of madness and rage. They had been discovered. No turning back now.

A darkspawn horde flooded the cavern from all sides, like vermin in tainted form. The vial of
lyrium still in hands, Nithius rushed to down it. The ensuing rush of mana through his veins
blinded him to the battlefield for a second of two. Heat grazed the skin at his left side, as
Morrigan’s fireball narrowly missed him in the progress. It exploded in a group of three hurlocks on
their way to reach them.

“Focus, elf!” she hissed, already preparing another offensive spell he so direly lacked himself.

Shaking himself, he fell back at the witch’s side, to be out of her way. And everyone else’s, to be
honest. It was chaos, like in the battle alongside the legion of the dead, and yet… different. The
prior sluggish movements of the broodmother’s tentacles have changed for a writhing wall that
lashed out, curling around empty air and withdrawing. It snapped and reached for the melee
fighters ducking underneath, hacking away at the thick, slimy appendages. The creature screamed
again, a piercing wail which seemed to shake the foundation of the cavern itself. Was it calling for
more darkspawn to come? The small horde was protecting it, tried to keep the Wardens and the
others from advancing to the broodmother, so much was obvious.

His ears still ringing, Nithius waved words of power in the air, creating a magical shield for
himself, and as many of their companions his mana allowed. This included Morrigan next to him
and both Wardens, although it looked as if they didn’t need it.

Alistair and Mahariel stuck together as they moved, slashed through the darkspawn front. They had
such different ways to fight, shouldn’t be able to complement each other as well as they did. He
supplied the brute strength and bulk to shield her, soaking up hits destined for Mahariel. The
unpredictability and speed in her movements made it nigh impossible for their opponents to block
her cuts and slashes, delivered with lethal precision. Tainted, rotten bodies fell to their feet like
flies as the result. They’d always worked well together, though the weeks down here, the constant
battle had heightened their understanding for each other on the battlefield.

Nithius’ head snapped to the snarling sound, but the darkspawn was dead before it could reach
him. Behind it, Oghren came into his field of vision. “Got some glowy thing for me too, since I
saved your ass, boy?”

“Yeah… probably.”

Oghren fought recklessly, raw and with anger. Nithius refocused his mana, away from the
Wardens toward the dwarf mowing down darkspawn without any finesse. It was a zero sum game
for his concentration to upkeep the protection, but the dwarf seemed to need it more than Mahariel
and Alistair.

“Shiny…” he huffed, sinking his axe into a genlock daring to come close. “Sodding good party
trick too, I bet.” Then with a scream he charged into the line cut by the Wardens and lopped off a
tentacle in his way. The severed piece continuing to thrash and writhe in the muck way too long
and the creature’s scream changed pitch again. Even angrier and now with an edge of frustrated
madness. There was not even a sliver left of the dwarf it once was and as such any form of pity was
displaced. “Let’s put Laryn out of her misery!” Oghren barked, as if reading his mind.

Alas, it wasn’t that easy. A new horde of ten to twenty darkspawn swarmed the cavern, beckoned
by the despairing cry of their, what? …mother? It was absurd to think in such humane terms of
these monsters, when all that was left was the urge to survive, to spread and destroy all they
touched. For this reason it was protected by them, so it could make more of them. By the ancestors,
now Hespith’s ranting made way too much sense.

“Oh for fucks sake...” Mahariel swore, when the new horde made a beeline for her and Alistair. Either they recognized in them their biggest threat, or were drawn to them by the Warden’s taint. Whichever was true, wasn’t important. Them being swarmed and separated was. Sten and the golem were still busy with the remaining darkspawn from the first wave on the other side of the cavern and as such no help in this situation.

“Morrigan!” The heat of the fireball she conjured and controlled in her hands was palpable upon his skin. He pointed at the group of them encircling each Warden separately. “The darkspawn!”

“It will only call for more darkspawn. We need to deal with it first!” she yelled, and chucked the fireball into the direction she intended. It exploded in a conflagration against the monstrosity and the heat of the fire was thrown back all the way where they stood. The creature wailed in pain and rage, its tentacles wildly flailing.

The witch was right, but this didn’t solve the current predicament. Sten and Shale pushed further to the middle and toward the broodmother, but they were momentarily closed in by the flames searing the creature’s foul flesh. The impact of the blast seemed to have swallowed Oghren too, since he was nowhere to be seen. The spell of his shield had been broken too, hopefully it had been protecting the dwarf from the worst of it. No longer side at side, Mahariel and Alistair held their own, like the Wardens in the stories. But for how long? Nithius pressed himself further into the wall and with breathless words conjured a rejuvenation spell for them. Sweat ran in rivulets down his face and the bile rose further in his throat, making it harder to concentrate, to hold even his own magical shield upright. The staff in his hands trembled. Maker and Creators, he was so out of his depth here. All he could do wa –

“Lenya...” It was Alistair’s strangled outcry, and Nithius searched for the reason of it. Oh. Oh no, Mahariel was no longer there... where where where? His eyes frantically searched the area, eventually finding her lying next to the cavern wall opposite, unconscious. Well, here goes nothing. Letting his shield explode in a blast, it threw back the horde on the ground, creating a path for him. Alas, Nithius also did hit Alistair with it. Great. Focusing on Mahariel, Nithius ran. They couldn’t lose her, a Warden and – shit shit shit! Two genlocks approached her unconscious form, ready to –

“Duck!” Nithius obeyed the command, and the cold grazed his neck as a bolt of ice flew overhead. It froze the two darkspawn solid and using his momentum, he hit them with his staff so hard that they shattered in many, bloody pieces. With a quick prayer to the Maker and the Creators, Nithius let his staff clatter to the ground, rushing to Mahariel’s side. Please let her be okay. Calling the spirits for aid in order to heal her would let him vulnerable, but they couldn’t lose her. It was a risk he had to take and to trust that the others would have his back. Literally.

Deep breaths. Focus! Which would be easier when the broodmother would stop wailing in agony. But that was good right? It meant they were closer to victory, to end this sordid affair. Nithius reached out, first to the fade spirits, then mapped out her body and injuries in front of his inner eyes. No internal bleeding, good. The clashing of steel rang in his ears, distracted him. He shook himself, drowned out the sound. Anders always said that healing was a bit of a puzzle, just with organs, ligaments and bones. Simply put everything back where it belonged. Funny how he thought of him now, after all these years. Not much was out of order here, thankfully, though she must have hit the wall hard for these kinds of injuries. Nothing he couldn’t fix, it was just very taxing on him, leaving him lightheaded.

Done. Good. He had helped.
Nithius patted her cheek. “Wake up, Mahariel!” There were steps behind his back, which was a literal target right now. Please let it be Alistair, please! The clash of blades ensued, some gurgling sound and a sharp intake of air. She had woken up, green eyes wide and alert. Instantly, she rolled to the side, made a stabbing motion with one blade still in hands. He turned his head and stared into the distorted grimace of a darkspawn that went slack a moment later.

Lenya had saved him. Maybe he should start call – Gasping for air, he found none. Why? Everything was too distant, too quickly. “No, no, no!” Her voice was too quiet as well, barely audible. Like in a daze, Nithius glanced down on himself; a rough blade protruded from his guts, from behind.

His consciousness slipped from his grasp, cold despite her iron grip and panicked words. He had helped, at least. This was… worth… someth –

Chapter End Notes

RIP Nithius, I will miss you. He was never meant to survive, hadn't in the old version as well. So yeah, he is the reason for the "minor character death" tag I have for the story. Writing/describing everything, especially the broodmother parts did take me a long while, but surprisingly i had so much fun with hammering the "make it gross" button, thus the CW at the start of this chapter.

Thank you for reading my story/chapter update. Let me know what you think, or simply give a brief "extra kudos" in the comments, if you like. It would be most appreciated <3

Two chapters of DR yet to go and then we have done it, the longest arc in the game/this fic is over. The mage tower one looks easy in comparison, ngl.
Chapter Summary

After the gruesome encounter with the Broodmother, there is only one way left: Forward. Lenya makes a decision and Alistair has an epiphany, while Leliana is bidding her time in Orzammar, fearing the worst.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oh, can't you see, see the light is fading?
And in the night the demons rage and call your name
No deeper madness than your own making
Visions lashing blades of shame, but will you take the blame?

-- Poets Of The Fall - Take control

“We need to move on!”

A large hand nudged his shoulder more than harshly, piercing through the fog hazing his mind. Still, Alistair did not look up, his gaze focused on the lifeless figure lying in its – his – own pool of blood. Nithius.

It seemed like a nightmare on repeat, worsening and unreal.

The chant, Hespith, the darkspawn womb-eggs, the Broodmother itself, and all the smell and sights here. And as if this wasn’t enough already, now this. Hadn’t the Deep Roads already taken enough toll on them? When would it stop? When would it finally be enough? Lenya cowered in a corner in a nigh catatonic state, staring at the blood on her gloved hands that were not hers. Alistair pressed his eyes shut, away from the miserable sight and the ensuing darkness was a relief. She was safe, alive, unlike him. For a few excruciating moments after a tentacle gripped around her body and squeezed, it seemed he’d lost her, was alone again. The only Warden left. One wrong step, a miscalculation of movement would be enough to make it reality, had been. Almost. He clawed at his ears to drown out the crack and yelp as her body hit the wall.

“Ugh. Do I have to carry It again?”

It was unclear if Shale meant him or Lenya with it, nor did it matter. The group present had a shocking lack of empathy for the situation at hand. Nothing new either, but – Tears fell down his cheek, halted his thoughts.

Nithius. He helped. He’d saved her, because he cared. And it led to his downfall, cost him his life. Would any of their cold and pragmatic companions present have done the same? They were all fine after all, survived, even if Oghren’s face was bruised and one eye swollen shut. Maybe being detached and callous was the better way, more successful, but that wasn’t him. Alistair cared, always would, probably too much. He wouldn’t change who he was, not even for the Blight and the
thousand battle it required to be fought in order to end it. Nithius was similar in this regard and now he was dead, dead, dead.

“Not keen on staying here either, big guy, but let’s give’em a sodding moment. Someone just died, someone we traveled and fought side by side with for weeks.“

“Oh? And now you expect this as a reason for me to wallow in grief in all this filth around us like –“

“No, but the boy who bled out in Missy’s arms is a good one, witchy! Poor sod deserved –“ His words stopped with a choked sigh and a curse underneath his breath.

Empathy was also found in the weirdest, most unexpected places. Like missing socks. A despaired laugh fought its way through the tears and up his throat. “Thank you, Oghren.”

The dwarf grunted in response, a milder one in tone that Sten gave as he whipped around and started to pile the darkspawn corpses next to the slack body of the broodmother. Oghren’s axe still stuck in its skull. “Laryn… she was a shield maid of my house, back then. One of the fiercest I knew, temper and blades for days.” He nodded into its general direction. “Least I could do was to free her from this sodding cruel fate.”

“Yeah.” There was a good man underneath all the crudeness and drunken antics, after all. “I’m sorry, Oghren.”

“Aren’t we all?” He let out a frustrated scoff. “What was Harrowmont thinking, sending that mage down here with you lot?” His eyes fixed upon Nithius’ corpse. “Such a waste of a good person and life. Just ‘nothin’ body for the sodding deep lord, aye?’” Stepping closer, Oghren reached up to clasp Alistair’s arm. Perhaps the dwarf had noticed the tears pooling in his eyes again. “Let’s not burn him with the spawns. He deserves at least that.”

Alistair’s throat was too tight to answer, so instead he gave him a brisk nod and turned away, back toward the corner where Lenya still cowered. He hesitated as he approached her, as rigid and still she was. A pang of hurt twisted his heart and his hand itched with the need to touch, to make it better. He couldn’t and the certainty of that knowledge was the hardest part of it all. “Lenya...” His own voice was weak, trembling.

She didn’t even react. The blood, both black and red, had dried upon her skin by now, and a large part of it was from Nithius. Maker. Giving in to the urge after all, he unclasped the buckles at his gauntlet and freed his dominant, right hand. Putting the gauntlet down on the ground, Alistair crouched down next to her, made himself as small as possible before reaching out with his now unarmored hand to her shoulder. “Lenya...” he repeated, louder now.

Her eyelids fluttered in a hectic blink and she flinched a bit at his attempt of touch. He retracted his arm again, let it rest on his knee instead. “It is my fault,” she croaked, her voice brittle, small. “It is not and you know it!”

“No?” Lenya looked up to him, her face scrunching to a scowl. “He saved me, but I couldn’t do the same for him. I wasn’t fast enough. He’d already been –“

“And you were out of it, were you not?”

She gave a timid nod that immediately morphed into a frantic shake of her head. “But still, I –“

“Maker, Lenya, I saw you being thrown by that tentacle-thing and for a moment I thought –“
Alistair licked his lips, balled his bare hand to a fist to keep it from shaking. “I thought I lost you.”

“No, because Nithius –” Her breathing stuttered as she fought for control over her emotions. “… healed me, helped me and I couldn’t – I wasn’t fast enough. I was careless, overlooked that fucking tentacle until it was too late. So yes, it is fucking well my damn fault, puppy!”

Anger. It came so easy to her, was a protective layer like a second skin. Months, even weeks ago Alistair would have recoiled by the force of it, unable to sort it in. But it wasn’t something personal, nor what he did which caused her outbursts. Well, most of the time, anyhow. Like now, where it was a mere tool used by her to push people away, perhaps even her own emotions. Arguing with her would only make it worse, let her retreat fully in her ire and stoic defensiveness. “Do you remember what you told me just a day before, in the Legion’s camp?”

Her scowl softened into a frown at his question. It was working, somewhat. “What do you mean?”

“You told me that one wrong step, one miscalculation could mean the end in battle.” Unclenching his hand, he reached out after all, but barely touched her shoulder. “It nearly was and it… scared me. Seeing the massive darkspawn horde and the archdemon, and then the broodmother, scared me too. We are just …” he stopped, mulling over his words. ‘Human’ would be definitely the wrong term to use, even if it fitted the meaning. “… two people,” he settled for, “… trying our best in this mess. Sometimes, even this is unfortunately not enough.”

Despite the tears filling her eyes, her forehead did its wrinkling thing that always happened if she was particularly stubborn or argumentative about something. “But it should have been. It should not happened.”

“Agreed.” Alistair gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “So many things have happened in the past weeks that should not have been, and still they did. Ostagar,” he swallowed, the name of the place still like poison upon his tongue,” is a big one, for one. I keep asking myself: Why me, why did I survive and not… Duncan.”

“I’m glad you did,” she said so quietly under her breath that her words seemed like his imagination. So am I. The thought came unbidden, unexpected, but it was the truth, wasn’t it? “You would be better off with Duncan, believe me,” he said nonetheless. “I lack the experience, not only as a Warden, but pretty much in everything. Except how to stab things with the pointy end of my sword, maybe. I’m quite apt in that.”

Her mouth set into a defiant pout, as if daring each of the tears to pass that line. They still did, of course. Even Lenya couldn’t scowl or pout them into submission. So, in a fit of suicidal impulse, Alistair reached up and wiped the offending tears wetting her cheek away. She stiffened a little, but did not turn away. Or murder him, and the latter part was most surprising of it all. “And even with that, I wasn’t quick enough in the last battle. So if you want to blame yourself for what happened, you have to blame me too.”

The scowl settled back into her features. First at his fingers he quickly withdrew before losing them after all, then at him. “This is not how it works, puppy.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” He shrugged at her objection, refused to dwell on it. “Point is, you are not perfect, Lenya, nor should you be. Aside of being boring, it is just not… feasible, if that makes sense?” Her glare remained unchanged, lingered. Oh, great. “However, you are perfectly capable, as proven time and time again, but there is a difference here.”

“Hmph.” Her tension deflated with that single noise, the breath released as a choked sob. “I hate it
when you make sense.”

“I knooow,” Alistair drawled, his tone faux-cheery. “It is the worst, right? I will stop with it now, and go back to fulfilling the role of the drooling dimwit assigned to me by Morrigan. I have a reputation to uphold, after all.”

“You are not stupid.” Lenya said, sniffing as she wiped at her tears. She kept telling him this, didn’t she? “Just… annoying.” Oh. And also that.

“Thanks, as always, Lenya. And you never fail to scare me.”

“Good.” Understandably, it missed the humorous edge now, but there was comfort in the familiarity of this particular exchange. He ducked his head further to catch her lowered eyes. “Do you need or want a moment alone still, free from my oh-so annoying presence?”

“No, Sten is right… we do need to move on.” So she heard that, huh? “I’m… sick of this place. Of it all.”

“Yeah.” No objection here. Alistair stood up, back to full height and reclaimed his missing armor piece from the ground. “We should. After we… said our goodbyes, right?” Without thinking he offered her his hand. And to his surprise, she took it.

They’d walked for an hour in complete silence after that. Away, just away, putting distance between them and that place, no matter how much their tired limbs screamed for rest. Now they’d stopped in just another, unremarkable cave, surrounded by stone as always. After today, the only way was forward, more than ever. Finding Branka was still their goal, though the question what to do with her once she was found was more uncertain than ever before. They still needed her to end the stalemate, but she was also responsible for what happened, wasn’t she?

Having cleaned his last piece of armor, Alistair leaned backwards at the wall, his exhaustion bone-deep. Their makeshift camp was quiet, except for Oghren’s rhythmic snoring and Sten’s murmur during his meditation. The ceiling of the cave arched high up, and a wink of natural light taunted him with its existence through its cracks, way out of reach. At least the vast height of the ceiling allowed him the luxury of a meager campfire, fueled by some coals gifted by the legion. Just an imitation of the real thing and incapable to burn for long, it still offered warmth, light and… much needed comfort. It lulled him into nodding off, his chin bobbing on his chest before the pictures of the broodmother, of Nithius, jerked him awake again. Bleary-eyed, Alistair stared into the shadowed alcove Lenya had taken refuge in, since their tent had been destroyed in an ambush weeks ago. Thus it was no wonder Morrigan had opted to spike the perimeter with magical runes, whenever possible. This at least gave them the luxury to be able to slack off on keeping watch if the encampment was enclosed by walls; like this one.

And so he reverted back to the by now established routine of his eyes falling shut and startling awake, moments, maybe minutes later. This time not the harrowing memories but a rustling noise was to blame. He forced them open again to check its source and instead found Lenya already standing in front of him, which gave his heart an extra start.

“Hey, puppy.”

“I – I will never get used to how silently you are able to move,” Alistair managed through the
hammering of his heart in his ears.

“Good.” Lenya gave him a little half-shrug and plopped down on the ground, and warmed her hands at the small fire. “Keeps you on your toes, then.”

“Also close to a heart-attack, thanks.” She’d chosen the place on the edge of his bedroll right next to him, instead of adjacent to the fire. There was nary any space left between them, which wasn’t exactly helpful for his poor heart to settle back into a calmer rhythm. “Can’t sleep either, I see?”

“No.” Lenya shook her head. The tang of metallic copper still clang to her skin and hair despite her having cleaned up a bit. “Figured I sit here for a bit instead.” She sniffed. Once, twice. “Where we can be stinky together.”

Right. At least there were no broodmother, nor darkspawn bits left in his hair now. He shuddered. The rest sadly had to wait. Still, he’d give his left arm for a hot bath right now to spare him the reeking embarrassment in presence of Lenya. His arm was threatening to fall asleep anyway, and thus wouldn’t be missed. “And you choose to sit here with me? Voluntarily?”

“Couldn’t sleep, so had time to think,” she mumbled and hugged her knees, staring straight ahead. “Ma serannas. Err, thank you, for earlier. For talking me down.”

There was this odd, warm feeling spreading through him again. “I have my moments,” he said and immediately grimaced at its flippancy. “I meant what I said, Lenya,” he added, quieter.

“I know and… I appreciate it.” The warmth inside spread further. “You were right –“

“Well, wonders never cease,” he blurted and shut his mouth with a plop upon her baleful stare. He couldn’t help it. Words were easier than silence, since the quiet would force him to acknowledge the nervous flutter in his stomach and these weird somersaults his heart did. This couldn’t be healthy, right? Alistair cleared his throat. “Sorry, go on.”

She gave him a rightful roll of her eyes. He deserved it. “I’m not to blame for what happened.” Oh good. “Branka is.” She inhaled, her words full of purpose and ire. “Which is why I will kill her. Just as a head’s up.”

“Oh, that is...” Alistair blinked. “… considerate of you.” Not that this ruthless woman wouldn’t get what she sowed in leaving all these people of her and Oghren’s house to their death. Or – He shook himself but the picture of the broodmother stayed in his mind. – worse. “But what about the treaty? We need her in order to end the stalemate.”

“Fuck it. I refuse to cooperate with this stone-cold bitch. Not after...” Lenya paused, her anger briefly subdued by the tremble and sob rippling through her. “… everything I have seen. Everything that had happened. Never.”

“Lenya, I understand and feel the same, but you are also letting your personal feelings supersede the goal of this mission.”

“Well it wasn’t personal before this fucker made it so.” Her posture tensed along with her fingers and she glared into the dying flames. “Now, now she has to pay. Not only for Nithius or Hespith, but all the people she’d fed to the darkspawn. I would do the same with this fucking asshole, but I cannot risk them turning her into a –“ The tremble returned, swallowing up the name neither of them dared to form. “I will rip her to shreds if needed.”

Oh, no doubt about it. When she was like this, there was no argument in Thedas which could convince her of the opposite. It was futile to even try. This stubborn, stubborn woman. “Are you
“Yes, and I will not be persuaded from it, Alistair. I’m only telling you in case…” Lenya nodded into the direction of the snores, where Oghren lay. “He will try something… afterwards. I don’t trust him, but I trust you to have my back, as fellow Warden.”

Oh. Oh no, she was using this line of argument. He’d made it clear before how he’d always stand at her side – no matter what – but this didn’t sit well with him. “Okay...” Alistair shifted in his seat, turned to her in honest. “Let’s say you kill her, what then, Lenya? What happens afterwards? We go back to Orzammar and lie about Branka in order to get our treaty honored?”

“Well?” She shrugged. “Or we find this Caridin place with the anvil on our own, without this festering excuse of a shitpile.” She pointed at Oghren. “That durgen’len talked about it, and in case you haven’t noticed the tunnels seem to lead to this place too. Trust me.”

“I do.” Alistair pinched the bridge of his nose. “Doesn’t mean I like it, though. Too many variables, too much that could go wrong. The Blight is bigger than that, bigger than getting back at Branka for slighting you.”

“Slighting me?” she snapped, her voice rising like her ire. Oh, this had been a bad choice of words. “Nithius died because of her! And you heard Hespith, didn’t you? Branka caused all this. All of it, the broodmother, the influx of darkspawn created through it. As a Warden, I have to put a stop to this and this fucking asshole's actions alone. Tell me I am wrong!”

Alistair sighed, long and hard. “You are not. After all we know now, I doubt she would even cooperate with us. Still, it would be best to wait with, err, that… until we have any relevant information that could be useful from her.”

“I know… I’m not stupid, puppy!” Her anger faltered, crumbled in a sudden outburst of sobs that shook her entire body. Maker, her letting her guards down around him was wondrous and flattering, but her sadness twisted his guts in knots and the ache of it resonated deep into his marrow. Not a day ago he had been able to elicit a bright, beautiful laughter out of her. Now, this seemed a lifetime ago. Never had the urge to take her into his arms burned brighter within him than in this moment.

Alistair reached out and withdrew his hand, before settling it a bit awkwardly on her shoulder after all. She hid her face behind both of her hands, muffled her whimpers to near silence this way. “I… just have to do something!” Lenya managed in between bouts of weeping, voice small and muted by her hands.

So it was about control, about regaining it, after it ran through her fingers like sand. To right the wrongs. This made perfect sense, under this perspective. As did her fierce reaction, her declaration to kill Branka, for that matter. “Oh, Lenya.” Again, led by impulse the hand on her shoulder moved to her other one to wrap her in a loose embrace. Not a moment later, Alistair stiffened, but she didn’t attempt murder, nor move. Huh, curious.

“I am tired. So fucking tired,” she sniffled, slowly quieting again. She rubbed her eyes and at the tears there. “Of all of it here.”

“Yeah,” He didn’t dare to look at her, nor move a single muscle. Even the arm around her shoulder was completely still. “Same. But we have to get through this first in order to secure the treaty, and we will. Promised.”

Lenya snorted in disbelief. “Your optimism knows no bounds, huh?”
“Yes it does, but we will get out of here. Alive. Back to the surface. To believe otherwise would be –” His words faded into another long sigh. It had to get better again, this couldn't be the end. Not so close to finding what they sought, and after they had barely started. He wouldn’t allow it. Lenya still shuddered at his side, desperate to keep her dejection from resurfacing again. It helped yesterday, so perhaps – “Look, Lenya, a bunny in –”

“No. I want the real thing, puppy. The sky and clouds. The sun. The sta–“ There was a sudden weight upon his shoulder, but he still didn’t dare to move. Had she – No, don’t look!

“Well,” Alistair chuckled instead, much too forced and awkward. “I can’t promise giving that to you, but I can promise to try helping you – us all – to get there again.” He turned to gauge her reaction after being met with complete silence, only to find her passed out at his shoulder. Well, that explained the weight, then. It was impolite to stare, to gape, even, and still his gaze lingered upon her. Why couldn't he look away? He should, but she was so beautiful, so how could he? It was more than that, though, his prior words the truth. He’d see it through at her side, carry her piggyback or bring the sun and stars down here, if needed. Anything to just see her smiling again. Oh. When had it become… that? When had her happiness and safety become so paramount to him?

Lenya stirring halted his jumbled thoughts and Alistair suppressed the strangled noise – a whimper? – from escaping his throat. Maker, his heart was ready to flee in the same way too, as hard and fast as it raced and jumped. “Len?” he whispered and she gave a low, peeved grunt in reply before she settled back against his side. Oh. Breathing calmly, the furrow of her brows had eased, her features free of the previous pain and sorrow. As it should be. The newfound ache in his chest seized up his lungs as he inhaled. He was so very, very warm with all the heat roiling through his body in waves. Oh. Oh, no. Leaning back, Alistair released the caught up air finally in a jittery exhale, but otherwise remained completely still to not disturb her sleep.

“Revas, stay!”

The mabari bounded through the marketplace, his prize in form of a sausage in his massive jaw. Of course he hadn’t settled for a singular one, but a whole string of it which trailed after him as he disappeared around a corner. Dagna was no help either, since the dwarf doubled over in laughter, leaving Leliana to the whole brunt of the fierce butcher lady. Glaring, she extended her hand to the bard. “Pay up, human!”

Digging into her way too light coin purse, she pressed a silver piece into the woman’s rough hands. She cleared her throat, its sound nearly swallowed by the pearly, snorting laughter of Dagna. “Seriously?”

“No my fault you can’t keep your weird surfacer animal in check.”

“Fine,” Leliana sighed, reluctantly adding another silver piece into the butcher’s hand. Turning away and toward Dagna, her eyes narrowed upon the dwarf. “Are you quite done now?”

Her dark green eyes twinkled with amusement. “Oh come on, it is funny, Leliana.”

“Not when you are short on money, dear.”

“Oh, what? Did Corra’s boss skimp out on paying you again?” Stemming her hands into her sides, Dagna huffed in the dramatic fashion typical for her. “I heard you playing. You are good. More than that. Degal should pay you more.”
“Yeah.” He was a slimy worm, that one. Keen on his own advantages alone, always eager to use people in need, like her. Like so many people in Orzammar, it turned out. In this way, it almost felt like home. Not Lothering – Maker save their souls– but Orlais. In her other life. Politics here – and everything else – in Orzammar was more cutthroat, direct. No comparison with Val Royeaux’s subtle mechanisms, the patient one by one steps made on a game board with dagger and tongue, both equally as sharp.

Perhaps she should wait in a darkened alley for him too, asking for a raise with a dagger at his throat. It seemed the only language Tapster’s owner would understand, after all. Leliana sighed, shook her head. No. No, this was what her old self would do and she was better than that. Still the money, she could use it, needed it, as her savings – and that of the Wardens – were running out. “I get by, don’t worry,” she said, her unconvincing words falling into empty space where Dagna had been, just moments ago.

Andraste’s ashes, spending time with her equaled herding a bunch of cats. Same restless energy, same chaos. But better than being alone, in this strange place that was and was not like Orlais. The dwarf came back a minute or so later, half-running and half-skipping, in sync with Revas bouncing around her. “Found the little rascal. All the meat was already gone, naturally. Are you not feeding him enough?”

“Oh, I do certainly,” Leliana replied with a sharp look toward the mabari snuffling at her feet, probably for more treats. “Three meals a day at Harrowmont’s estate, even. Plus scraps. Alas this dog has a bottomless stomach.” Revas whined, yet didn’t look as ashamed as the situation would require him to be. “It almost seemed as if he doesn’t wants us to have money to buy the equipment needed for Ferelden’s winter, in case we have to leave.” To Orlais. To deliver a letter that gained in weight within her backpack with each passing day.

“Perhaps…” Dagna tilted her head, interrupted by a woman pushing past them. The marketplace was less bustling after the evening bell, but there were still enough people underway, always would, here. “Revas does this, because he doesn’t want to leave?” The mabari gave her an agreeing boof and licked her hand. “See, I was right!”

She heaved a sigh and all anger dissipated with the exhale. The frustration within lingered, however. “As much I understand it, it already had been over two months since the Wardens left for the Deep Roads.”

“Yeah, but they are Wardens! Mighty warriors.” Also the same age like this wide-eyed girl in front of her, not to forget. “They will be fine. Deep Roads are well, deep, so it takes a while.”

Dagna was fiercely passionate and smart, could talk for hours about obscure magic tomes in detail – oh so many details – but in some things her age and resulting naivety showed clearly. “I hope you are right.” With every day passing without news and closer to the three months ultimatum, her optimism regarding their return drained a bit more. Reassuring how this dwarf had enough for both of them, then.

“Are the Wardens going to Kinloch Holds after that? I have been trying to reach someone there for years; I’ve sent missives with every caravan, but I never get a reply.”

That again? “You keep asking, Dagna. Just not the people who need to hear this question. Like your parents and the Wardens, come their return, Maker willing,” Leliana answered, a bit harsher than meant. She acquiesced with a sigh. “Let us leave here. I have to get my lute for the tavern and I’m certain your father waits for you with supper.”

“Oh, no.” Smiling she shook her head. “That won’t start until my mother is home. Her shift ends
soon, so I will accompany you to Harrowmont’s estate, if this is okay?”

“Of course it is, Dagna. Sorry if I have been too harsh, I didn’t mean to. It is just… all this waiting, these weeks passing by without knowing —“

“Aye.” Dagna gave her arm a brief squeeze. “It is hard to wait for something that is important to you, not knowing if it will ever happen.”

The young dwarf was talking about the magic studies she yearned for, of course. Though in its gist, the uncertainty was the same. “Exactly.” Nodding, Leliana whistled sharply to ensure the mabari would follow this time, at least. He did, and together they headed for the stairs to the Diamond Quarters.

As soon they arrived, Revas rushed ahead and vanished into the cluster of bystander clamoring around Harrowmont’s estate. “Stay back!” Pushing the approaching Dagna behind her back, Leliana surveyed the area. “Something is wrong!” As if heeding her words, the mabari came trotted back with a whine, seconding the sensation of wrongness.

What was this commotion about? Armed guards rushed in and out of the estate’s entrance in an alarming rate and the hushed whispers of the noble bystanders filled her ears. Something of an… attack? Attack on who? Leliana’s stomach sank, the guards being Harrowmont’s own men did not bode well for this piece of knowledge.

While she was still conflicted between slipping into the shadows unseen and darting forward to get more information, Dagna did the latter. “What happened?”

One woman with a ridiculous hairdo turned, mustered her from head to toe and her look turned sour. That part was exactly like in Orlais, and probably everywhere else. Nobles always thought themselves as better, ugh. “Are you not a little lost here in these parts, child?”

“No. No I am not!” Dagna protested, all ease vanishing from her voice. “My mother is in there!”

“No. No I am not!” Dagna protested, all ease vanishing from her voice. “My mother is in there!”

“Ah. That is too bad, then,” she only said and turned back around, no longer caring. The urge to shake or strangle that haughty hag grew with every passing moment, but movement at the entrance caught Leliana’s attention. “Non, merde! Au nom du Maker, dit-moi ce n’est pas vrai!” she cursed under her breath, slipping back into her native tongue. This couldn’t happening. A middle-aged woman in servant clothes was led out of the estate with her hands in cuffs and –

“Mother…” She barely caught Dagna’s wrist to keep her from breaking through the crowd and toward her mother, surrounded by guards. The woman – Olissa – looked down, her lips pressed to a thin line as she silently was led away. Oh, no. This was all wrong. She didn’t even fight back a little, seemed resigned to her fate.

“Stay, Dagna. Nothing is help–“ The dwarf struggled against her grip and eventually managed to free herself from Leliana holding her. She ran up to the cluster of guards, but the words exchanged were lost to the bystanders’ conversation.

“She is the one who brought that smith’s girl in, isn’t she?” said a man, while another nodded.

“Thought she was loyal to Harrowmont, though. And now this. A shame.” He clicked his tongue. “Good servants are hard to find these days.”

A loud murmur went through the crowd when another, much younger woman was led away from
the estate’s entrance. Unlike Olissa, she was kicking and screaming and the guards struggled to restrain her. “That is her! The smith girl with the duster child!” exclaimed the same woman from before and sniffed. “Should have stayed in the dust where she belongs, along with that brat!”

Wait, duster child? Leliana's eyes fixed the young woman in the distance once more, the face now familiar. But from where? The memory crashed down on her like a ton of bricks, not a moment later. It was the girl from Dust Town, the one Lenya reunited with her family, and Dagna’s mother helped to find work in Harrowmont’s estate. “Zerlinda...” Her name fell like a curse from Leliana’s lips. “What have you done?” Heart racing, the bard pushed through the crowd and shoved that particular noble woman perhaps a bit harder aside than needed. She would live, it was not as if she had any empathy for anyone other than herself and that stupid hair.

Olissa and Zerlinda had been led away and now with everyone out of sight, the crowd behind them started to disperse again. Leliana paid no heed to them, instead took Dagna into her arms, who was frozen in place, sobbing. She rocked the young dwarf a bit, made comforting noises. “What happened, do you know?”

Not looking up or stopping weeping, Dagna nodded. “Can you tell me?” Another nod, but she continued crying, so Leliana waited until she had quieted enough to speak.

“M-my mother...” she sniffl ed, pawing at her eyes and the tears there. “… they say she helped that girl to poison him.”

“Poison whom?” Please not –

“H-Harrowmont,” Dagna managed and Leliana’s eyes fell shut. Oh, no! “If he doesn’t survive the night, my mother... they will –” Revas whined, butted the dwarf’s head with his snout. Further words were not needed either way, the cruel implications within were obvious without it. Oh Maker, there had to be something she could do. Anything!

Leliana knelt down, next to her. “Listen, Dagna. Your mother is innocent, so nothing will happen to her, you hear me!” Of course, she didn’t know that, but to console her was more important right now. “We will get her out of there. Promised. But first lets get you back to your father, okay?”

She helped her up and together, arm in arm, they walked back to the common quarters in shocked silence.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading my story/chapter update and your support thus far. Consider leaving a comment/kudos/feedback on your way out. It would be most appreciated <3

Change notes: This was a fun chapter to write and, as with so much in this fic, is completely newly written. It has been 84 years but Alistair is finally aware that, no it is not just a crush, but more. Took him long enough to arrive at the conclusion, but he finally has, even if he is still hesitant to give it a name. Leliana had a lot of time to get to know Orzammar and Dagna, of course. As such having both of them becoming friends was a no-brainer. I also switched up Dagna's bg with Zerlinda, and yeah, i have been building up a sort of assassination plot since Zerlinda was asked by Lenya who she wants as king before the DR plot. Guess she is a Bhelen supporter, lol.
Next time: Meeting Branka and Caridin in the most not-canon Lenya way
*fingerguns*
Chapter Summary

Meeting Branka did not turn out as expected, then again nothing in the Deep Roads had, so far. Also Lenya and Morrigan having a heart to heart after finding Caridin.

Chapter Notes

Heya, i am back, with some delay. This is my last buffer chapter and also last chapter for this year, as i have been a bit in a writing slump lately and need time off to charge creative batteries/write another chapter without the pressure of a publishing schedule.

Thanks to everyone reading and supporting this story thus far and i hope you have great time with this chapter as well as nice holidays and good start into 2020.

Theme song for this chapter, and Lenya in general, tbh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A loud rumble disturbed the silence and then the tunnel behind them was closed off through the debris of a rockslide. “Tseemed too convenient to be a coincidence.

"Let me be blunt with you," said a voice, resounding through the enclosed area they were now captured within. "After all this time, my tolerance for social graces is fairly limited." High up on a cliff a dwarf-sized figure in heavy armor towered over the group. Pale brown eyes stared down to them, narrowed in disdain. “I hope this doesn’t bother you!”

"Shave my back and call me an elf! Branka?!" Oh, that explained a lot. Too much, indeed. That disgusting dwarf rushed forward in delight to the person emerging from the shadow. This was Branka, then? She was as unremarkable and pitiful as imagined, the picture perfect of a coward. What made her dangerous was her air of arrogance, her own certainty of her sharp intelligence and the resulting ruthlessness from it. Normally… admirable but it lost its fascination with running into and having to deal with her vile pets earlier. Morrigan suppressed a shudder. There was no time to wallow in these memories, not now. “By the Stone! I barely recognized you!”

Twas no surprise, was it? That filth had last seen her two years ago, before this tart escaped from his leering, unwashed and nasty drunk self, and turned to her own gender for comfort. That part was very much understandable, but not how no blotches or other telltale marks marred her near bone-white and sallow skin. Corpses littered the ground every few steps, decomposed and skeletonized. They were too small and different to be darkspawn… dwarves of her house, then? How very fitting. Though it also spoke of the mortal dangers lying beyond the darkness of the tunnel ahead, and the only way forward now their way was cut off and they caught within. A testing ground twas, but for what?

“Running out of bodies to throw to the darkspawn, I see,” Morrigan reflected any haughtiness bestowed upon her back like a mirror. The poise, her certainty of being safe there, out of reach was
as galling as twas unimpressive. “Tis now our turn, I take it?”

“I did what I must,” she spat, every word edged with a single-minded madness. “But do not flatter yourself, mage. No one has reached the anvil past Caridin’s maze of traps so far. No matter how many bodies I threw at it. Do not think you can make a difference, mage!” Ah, so she planned to kill them then here? How very trite and unimaginative.

“Throw it down to me, so I can crush its tiny, crazy head!” As always, the golem was losing no time to skip to violence. The idea was right, this time though its execution would be difficult, though not impossible. A fireball or bolt of ice could easily bridge the distance and height Branka had put between herself and the group.

“Branka, I tried two years to find you and you just ignore me?” Twas too pathetic how this filth was throwing himself at her feet, especially given that woman’s involvement in all this. The circle-taught idiot elf prattled on for weeks, had been so very annoying, but his demise was unneeded. And he died saving Lenya, healing her injuries caused by the monstrosity induced by that dwarf’s ruthless pursuit for the anvil. That alone was reason enough to view Branka as the enemy and not a person to be admired for her thrive regarding her goals.

Morrigan’s knuckles turned white around her staff, well it had been in the elf’s possession, to be exact. Twas not as if he needed it anymore, after all. And her taking it had been a necessity, since hers had been snapped in two during the fight against – No, she did not mourn his death, why would she? She gladly left the sentimentality of it to Lenya and her fellow moron of a Warden.

Branka scoffed down at him. "Oghren. It figures you'd eventually find your way here. Hopefully you can find your way back more easily." Her eyes snapped back at Morrigan, narrowed further. “And what shall I call you, mage?” Curious, she just answered her own question. Perhaps the supposed Paragon wasn’t so bright after all, or the Deep Roads had rotted her brain away. Both were very viable possibilities.

She opened her mouth to reply, but Lenya cut her short. “Fuck names, fuck the reason why we searched for you durgen'len turd initially.” She shook with the force of her anger, her voice slightly cracking. “You are to blame for everything that happened, killed all the people of your house, created these monsters...”

"They tried to leave me, Warden!” Interrupting, Branka put emphasis on the title with a sneer, turned it into mockery. “Even my Hespith! She was pledged to me, should have never left! She swore she'd do whatever it took to find the Anvil. There was no other choice, the sacrifice had to be made."

“You sacrificed a hundred, if not hundreds of people to your madness!” The fool spoke up, shook his head. “You really are as insane and obsessed as Hespith said you would be. I can’t believe we sought you out for aid. As a Warden, especially in regard of what happened earlier, I want no part in it.”

“Most of them were dying of the taint already,” Branka replied with a shrug, not caring. “I knew what the women would become, once they would change and transform. It meant I would have an endless supply, fresh darkspawn to test the traps!” Oh, would someone make her shut up, please? That smugness was unbearable, the way she was marching up and down on the ledge, lecturing them with her perceived grandiosity. “In this way they could still serve me, let me find the Anvil! It was the only way!”

“Right,” With a tilt of her head, Lenya tensed further, paused for effect. “Just one final question –“
"Enough words, if you want my help for whatever had happened in Orzamm –“

“Does your ass get jealous of the shit that comes out of your mouth?” Beside her, the idiot burst into laughter, which he promptly bit down again. Leave it to the Dalish to summarize Branka’s crazed speech to a common denominator. And in all its crudeness, she wasn’t wrong. Best to stop standing here and listening to her drivel, her justifications for – Another shudder ran down Morrigan’s spine, as the pictures reappeared, unbidden.

"What has this place done to you?" One’s foolishness was boundless when even the drunken moron recognized and called you out on it. "I remember marrying a girl you could talk to for one minute and see her brilliance!"

“I’m still your paragon, Oghren,” she sneered and took a deliberate slow, self-important step toward the edge of the ledge, to look down at Lenya. "There is only one way out, Warden. Forward. Through Caridin's maze and out to where the Anvil waits." With that, the discussion was over for the Paragon-turned-single-minded imbecile, since she whirled round, ready to leave into the shadowed tunnel beyond.

As though having waited for this moment, Lenya put a small knife between her mouth, kept it locked there with her teeth. What was she doing and – no, by all laws of nature, twas impossible, she couldn't! And yet the Dalish jumped up as soon she reached the ledge, gloved hands gripping ragged rocks. It only took one, two fluent, practiced motions, then she already was standing up there. Without a chance for Branka to turn, least to react, Lenya slit her throat from behind, and threw her down the edge. The paragon crashed with a crunching, gurgling noise to the ground below, nearly burying her husband under her body. Alas, the filth managed to side-step the impact. "Fuck the anvil," Knife clattering upon the stone above, Lenya wiped the fresh spray of blood from her face with one arm. “This is for Nithius, bitch!"

“Finally!” Shale’s outcry teared through the shocked silence settling for a minute, far longer than Lenya needed to kill Branka. It happened all too quickly, was a matter of mere seconds and movements. Impressive!

Disturbingly laughing, the golem heaved a heavy foot and stomped on Branka’s body. Now it was Morrigan herself who sidestepped the onslaught of bodily fluids and other Paragon-bits splattering across the rock wall and into her general direction.

She threw it a glare. “Branka was already dead, golem!“

It shrugged. “Had to make sure.”

Twas ensured now, certainly. Morrigan glanced away from the crushed remains of Branka’s body, clicked her tongue. “Amusing how she had all this heavy armor but no mind to protect her throat.” Her gaze went up, toward Lenya instead. “You recognized that, didn’t you?” Ending a life in mere seconds through seizing an opponent’s weakpoint against them, this was admirable, not Branka’s delusion of grandeur.

“Yup.” Lenya grinned, and the white of her teeth stood in stark contrast to the red coating her face and armor. “Right after she stepped out of the shadows, I knew how I was going to kill her. She just had to give us all the information needed, and, well, turn around.”

The drunkard bristled. “You did plan this?”

“I told you I would do it, durgen'len, right after meeting Hespith.” She picked up the blade from the ground, a threat veiled within. “You got a problem with that?”
“Oh Maker.” Alas, the idiot did overcome his shocked silence and it had turned to awe. With the way he’d been trailing after her like a besotted puppy down here for weeks now, twas no surprise; rather sickening. Twas an apt name bestowed upon him by Lenya, but surely the Dalish wouldn’t be impressed by such a simpleton? “Remind me to never get on your bad side.” His laugh was throaty, a bit breathless, even. Ugh. “H-how… did you do this?”

Lenya shrugged. “I’m good in climbing, always been. Just a matter of practice, nothing more, puppy. Throat-slitting is optional, though.”

He chuckled. “That is, um, good to know.”

"Stupid woman!” The filth muttered, more to himself than addressing anyone. “Always knew the obsession for the anvil would kill her one day.”

“Very fascinating.” Sten spoke up the first time in, well, hours, to be exact. “You have demonstrated your skills upon the one person we were meant to find.”

“I wonder if the big tainted bird is still there,” the golem said, “I would like to crush it, too.”

“I understood the need for tactical retreat back then…” He pointed at Branka’s maimed corpse. “But not this. You undid all progress made –”

“Nope, I did not, Sten. You heard this asshole, the anvil is beyond the maze. We don’t need Branka to find it. “She glanced down and grimaced. “Obviously.”

“Did you miss the part where she said it is full of traps?”

“Nah, puppy. Besides you can disarm them like usual, by running blindly into them.”

“That is – hey!” he whined and Morrigan eyes reflexively rolled back into the back of her head with a groan.

“Are you planning to stay up there, then? Tis not that there is another way to reach the anvil, nor back.”

“Maybe there is,” Lenya replied and pointed at the tunnel behind her. “Must be a shortcut –“

“Or a deathtrap,” the idiot said, not less whiny. “You can’t seriously plan to go this way on your own?”

“Could help there ya, Missy. No hard feelings, Branka was a mad, bleeding nug-tail, after all. Just wish – no, it doesn’t matter. What’s done is done.” He peered up the cliff. “There is a only problem with the height here. As there sodding often is, bah.”

“I could toss it,” Shale offered. “But I may crush it.”

The idiot sighed. “I have a rope in my backpack, if you find something to secure it on –“

“Why are you so keen to send the durgen'len with me?”

“Two words, Lenya: Stone-sense. Oghren can help you find a way through the tunnel and even he would not be stupid enough to attempt anything, after, well, you demonstrated your skills, right?”

The words used seemed harmless, but bore once more a veiled threat. Twas just unusual coming from the simpleton. “Nah, didn’t survive Orzammar for so long without a knife at my throat or between my ribs, only to change it now...”
“Good.” The Warden nodded, throwing the reclaimed rope up to Lenya who caught it. “Compared to the unknown tunnel behind you, Len, the way through the maze is more straightforward in comparison, as it leads in one direction only. … Hopefully.”

“Someone should really explain the definition of the word ‘maze’ to you, though since we don’t have hours to spare…” Morrigan channeled her magic, let her limbs shrink into feathered wings, as she shifted into a raven. Flying upwards, she landed next to Lenya and regained her human form. “Let’s split up, then.”

Twas uncertain what it had been, either sheer chance, or the idiot’s not so idiotic idea to take Oghren with them, but one hidden, narrow way sensed by the dwarf indeed led to the wide chamber with the Anvil. And its very much alive Paragon named Caridin within, as luck had it. Alive and preserved for eternity as a golem, that was. Having gotten all relevant information from the Paragon-turned-golem, there was not much else to do than to wait for the others to arrive as well. Hopefully soon, too.

Morrigan rubbed her temples in the attempt to stave away a budding headache behind her skull. Caridin’s rhythmic hammering on the anvil in order to forge a crown, and the various, thick lyrium veins running across the ceiling did not help matters, either. Lenya, however, seemed much less perturbed by it all. Leave it to the Dalish to settle down in the center of the chamber and spread out the provisions stored in her pack for a spontaneous picnic.

“How can you sit here and eat?”

“Why not,” she said, mouth still half-full of hardtack and dried meat. Lovely. At least she washed it down with the water in her flask before talking again. “We arrived at our destination and I was hungry. What else is there to do, while we wait for the others?”

Twas hard to argue that reason, admittedly. “Besides,” she continued, stuffing a whole handful of … worm-like things into her mouth and paused for chewing this time. Morrigan seized the break to sit down herself, and the blackened stone was comfortably warm beneath her. Was the heat coming from the molten lava in the chasm below? “No one wants to kill us for a change and it is actually warm and bright here. By far the least shittiest place in the Deep Roads. Not that it is saying much, but –“ Lenya took another pull out of her water skin, and offered her the same dubious drawstring pouch where she’d fished out the bugs. “Caterpillars? I dried them to preserve them for travel as my people do, but they are a bit plain without roasting them.”

“No, thank you.” Morrigan was no stranger to using alternative food sources back in the wilds, bugs among them. Though this was just a mean to an end if hunting failed that day, and not used as travel snacks like Lenya did. “I’d prefer not to eat bugs, if I don’t have to.”

She gave her a shrug. “Your loss. They are filling.”

Silence settled between them and stretched, giving her time to let her eyes wander. Unfortunately, they intended to set upon the disgusting dwarf sulking a bit further down, near the main entrance of the chamber. Ever since arriving and learning the truth about the anvil, he’d kept his distance, which suited her well. He’d served his purpose, and the less she’d see of this filth, the better.

“Why do you plan to destroy the anvil?” It had been already a point of heated discussion earlier,
yet it was worth another try in order to preserve such power. “Twould be most useful to have such a tool of creation, to discover its marvel, don’t you think?”

“To have an army of golems fighting darkspawn for me? Yes,” she nodded, though the flinted eyes belied her agreement. “Having to use souls of the living to create golems in order to achieve it? Fuck, no.”

“It is not too late yet, Lenya!” Twas more than frustrating how utterly stubborn this woman was. “If you destroy the anvil, I swear you will regret it!”

“Morrigan, my people had been enslaved for centuries and, annoying as the durgen'len are, I refuse to hand over this supposed ‘tool of creation’ to some asshole king bound to subject anyone disagreeing with them to golem slavery.”

“Hmph, that idiot did rub off on you with his idealistic fantasies, I see.” She waved her off. “Have it your way, then.”

“Nah, he did not. It is just occasionally... I give a shit.” Lenya rolled her eyes, her tone dipping further into sarcasm. “I know, my biggest flaw, and all that.” Shrugging, she pointed over her shoulder toward the annoying hammering sound. “In fact, would it not been too heavy for me, I would have shoved the anvil into the lava already!”

“You’d think Caridin being capable of at least that, even if he is unable to destroy it by conventional means.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Lenya stuffed a piece of salted cheese in her mouth and added a handful of dried fruits for good measure. Half-swallowing, she continued speaking with the remains swirling around. Looking past her, Morrigan focused her gaze upon the glowing lava streams in the distance. Better than to watch her eat all too closely. “Could be that he isn’t able to touch, or rather harm it, that the anvil doesn’t permit it. Because something is seriously off with it. Not sure if it is the lyrium or magic, but I don’t like it.”

At that, her head snapped back to the Dalish. “You… feel it too?”

“Yeah. Dearest father of mine was the clan’s late Keeper and powerful mage,” she said, bitterness interlacing within her flippant tone. “Or so I heard whenever my clan lamented that I didn’t inherent his abilities. Well, joke is on them, I’m not a mage, but still able to tell whenever magic is around me. Getting goosebumps, shivers down my spine, when things are off, magically. Or when magic is being used in general.” Lenya shrugged, taking another sip. “Shit like that.”

“That’s… – Odd? A non-mage being sensitive to magic without any training, not even of the templar sort, ugh, was rare. “…interesting.”

“I know that look, Morrigan. Don’t worry, I won’t burst out fireballs any time soon. Still your job here.” Another shrug. “Not that I didn’t try, believe me.”

“Tseems you don’t need it either way, given how you handled Branka. Twas impressive.”

“Hmm,” Lenya hummed, leaning back on the hands behind her to stretch herself. “Matter of practice? Lots of trees, cliffs, crevices and rocks in the woods I grew up in. The trick is to use the energy of motion to your advantage, works for climbing and fighting. Big, tall dumbasses thinking they are invincible because they are big and strong?” Her lips quirked up to a grin. “Well, they are fucking not.”

“Ah.” Morrigan smirked. “Like your fool of a fellow Warden, you mean?”
“Nah, more like... Sten. He relies a bit too much on his brute strength for my taste. Say what you want about Alistair...” Lenya raised her hand to cut her off, before she could take her up on the offer. “… But he is observant and able to adapt in battle. This makes it easy to fight at his side, despite our vast differences in style and approach.”

Since when was she willing to praise the fool? Ugh, such development between these two was unwelcome, but, alas, present. “For the fool being oh-so-good in battle, he needs quite long to appear here, doesn’t he?”

“You sound as if you are hoping he got stuck in and skewered by a trap?” Snorting, Lenya arched an eyebrow at her. Well, she wasn’t wrong. “Eh, not worried about that, puppy isn’t alone and has Sten and Shale who can play the battering ram for him. Gotta wait for big guy there to finish his crown for us, and for them pushing the anvil down into the lava. Then we can finally, finally leave this shithole.”

“Indeed. Let’s hope it will be soon then.” With this, silence settled over them for a long while, only disturbed by the hammering sound of the Paragon forging the crown on the anvil. Some time passed, spent in comfortable stillness as the Dalish had dozed off. Twas tempting to follow suit and yet remained her gaze fixed on the entrance and narrowed soon after. Where do they –

“No! N-n-n-nooo!” Behind her, Lenya jerked awake, panicked.

Morrigan turned to grip her arm, to stop her flailing. Mainly to prevent the Dalish from hitting her and from flinging herself into the lava below. “You are safe. For the moment, that is.”

Wide-eyed, she was breathing heavily, then blinked rashly and pressed her eyes shut in the attempt to calm down. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” she swore, embracing her knees as she trembled. Darkspawn nightmare? Or – “I can’t get this shit out of my head.” Ah. Lenya needn’t to name it, for Morrigan was all too aware what was meant. _Broodmother_. She barely was able to suppress her own shudder as the name appeared in her thoughts. “You are carrying his staff,” Lenya said, eyes flinting as she pointed at the intricate staff, carved from white wood. “Why?”

“Because the elf didn’t need it any longer. Obviously,” she replied with an annoyed sigh. “Mine got destroyed in the fight, mind. Tis not sentimentality, at all. His death was unneeded, but I do not bemoan it either.”

“I see. So...” Still squinting in suspicion, the Dalish tilted her head. “It is easier to pick items from the dead than to accept a gift for you?”

“That again?” Morrigan bristled, though managed to swallow the barbed response down that wanted to follow these words. Best not to fuel the fire. She shook her head. “I am aware I have omitted to ever thank you for giving the mirror to me. Unprompted as it was, it was... thoughtful of you.”

“Hmm,” Lenya nodded. “I’m glad you liked it. ...Where is it now?”

“I left it back in Orzammar. I… didn’t want it to break, like the other one.” Before she could stop herself, the admission was already made.

“What do you mean?”

“I had such a mirror once, when I was a child.” Morrigan glanced away from her, into the distance. “I stole it from a carriage in a village I visited. I hugged it to my chest with delight as I sped back to the Wilds.”
“Let me guess, Asha'belannar once more contested for the ‘mother of the year’ award?” Lenya asked, scoffing. “I know my birth-mother did.”

“What is this supposed to mean?” She shook her head. “Never mind. If you mean whether Flemeth was furious with me, you would be right. And she was right too, in teaching me a lesson. I had risked to be discovered before I even came fully into my power, and this for a pretty bauble.”

“She smashed the mirror, didn’t she?” The Dalish rolled her eyes. “This, this right here I meant with my previous remark, Morrigan. Gifts are rare in my culture, because all possessions are communally shared within a clan. Just common sense, you know?” Her hand wandered to the belted knife at her side. “Yet, there are some few things that are only mine and I treasure them. I hate that Asha'belannar did not allow you the same freedom, in particular when you were but a child. It is cruel.”

“I –” There she was struggling for words about an event that happened over a decade ago, if not more. It was.. idiotic. Useless. Such sentimentality only stood in the way of what was really important. Power. Survival. Why cling to bauble that was neither of these attributes? "Perhaps. And yet Flemeth was right to break me of my fascination in smashing the mirror, heartbroken as I might have been about it. It is in the past, no longer relevant.”

“So… you don’t want the mirror, then?”

Morrigan glared at her for this question, though before she could reply in honest, the sound of heavy footfalls behind her interrupted her.

“It is done,” Caridin announced, his voice ringing hollow and tinny, as if he spoke through a helmet. He handed Lenya an impossibly gaudy and angular thing that resembled more a bucket than a crown. "Give it to whom you will. I do not wish to hear their names, nor anything more of them. I have already lived far beyond my time."

“Creators, it is so ugly;” the Dalish blurted, grimacing at the crown in her hands. Clearing her throat, she looked up to the Paragon. “Err, thanks, though, I will.”

“What about the anvil, elf? You promised its destruction. I cannot leave until it is done.”

“Tis amusing that you look at us for th– Lenya, stop that!” But too late, she already had donned this ugly thing. It sat askew but high on top of her head.

“What?” Lenya asked, her tone mock-offended and ridiculously high-pitched. “Do not dare to give me commands, witch! I’m the queen of Orzammar! May everyone bow down to my greatness!”

“Gladly,” replied a new voice coming from the entrance and Morrigan reflexively rolled her eyes. Not only at Lenya’s childish display, but at the owner of said voice as well. “Just give me a moment to catch my breath.”

“Andaran atish’an, felon dorf’len!” she said brightly, bowing gracefully. Well as gracefully one could while holding a golden bucket on her head in place with both hands. Feather and Damnation, she was surrounded by idiots.

Sten slapped his face with the armored palm of his hand. “Ferelden is doomed.”

The other idiot bit back his laughter. “I have no idea what this means, but same to you, Len? Unless you insult – wait? What is this thing on your head?”

“My ugly crown, of course.”
“Oh, of course. Where –“

“Fuck, it is heavy!” With another grimace, Lenya finally put it down again. “Well, we need it to settle the stalemate. Big guy Caridin over there forged it for us and in return we destroy the anvil in pushing it down into the lava. It didn’t budge as I tried it, so you have to do this. Raw strength and all.” She paused to turn to the golem. “Oh also, Shale, you are a dwarven woman. Or were, long ago. Surprise?”


“It is true,” Caridin said, stepping into their vision, his attention directed at the other, smaller golem. “Shayle of House Cadash. Yes, I made you into a golem, but before that, you were a dwarf. Just as I was."

“It… knows who I am?” Twas odd to see the golem so startled.

“Yes, you were the finest warrior who served King Valtor. And the only woman to volunteer to become a golem.”

"Woman? Dwarf?" Shale was just as surprised as the rest of them. "How?"

"I laid you on the Anvil of the Void, here in this very room. You reassured me as I prepared. I remember it clearly even now."

“Hah,” came from that filth’s direction. “A dwarven lady. Nice!” He waved a piece of paper in the air. “Also found a way to make Karol fight for us in the Blight after all. Never say old Oghren isn’t helpful.”

“Can I crush it?” the golem asked, turning to Lenya.

“Nah we still need him for our way back. … Alas.”

“I’m glad I was able to meet you once more, Shayle of the House Cadash.” The Paragon gave it – her – a respectful nod, before turning toward the others. “There is still the matter of the anvil.”

“Right, Sten, Alistair. Big guys,” Lenya said, pointing over her shoulder. “It is there, and it has to go… –“ she made a throwing motion. “… all the way down.”

“Why are we destroying the anvil, again?” He rolled his shoulders, probably in preparation of throwing himself into the lava during pushing the anvil toward it. One could hope, at least. “Not that I don’t trust your decisions, I just feel a bit… uninformed.”

“Because it enslaves living souls in order to create golems, puppy. Not a thing you want to keep around, right?”

“Yeeaaah, that is a good reason for its destruction, admittedly.” Sten only grunted vaguely, like usual.

“Where the fuck have you been so long, anyhow?”

“Ah, missed mee?” Lenya rolled her eyes in unison with Morrigan at that. He cleared his throat. “Well, um, it turned out that the way through the maze wasn’t as straightforward after all.”

“Who would have thought that?” Morrigan gasped out in fake shock. “Except for everyone else not being you, idiot?”
“Can you both continue bickering on the way out of this shithole? I’m eager to be elsewhere. No offense, big guy. You are good.”

“None taken,” Caridin replied, amused.

It took both of them several attempts and the additional aid of the drunkard to finally push the anvil into the fiery pit below. Alas the fool did not fall in after it. Pity. She would have to endure him for longer then still. Ugh.

“You kept your promise, elf. Your compassion shames me.” The paragon stopped at and inclined his metallic head toward Lenya. "You have my eternal thanks," he said, walking toward the edge.

“What are you —“

"I have lived far beyond my time. Now where the anvil is no more —“

The Dalish frowned, understood. “I see.”

“Atrast nal tunsha... may you always find your way in the dark,” Caridin said and leaned forward, to tumble over the edge, following his invention into the lava below.

“Well...” Lenya breathed into the shocked silence ensuing and picked up the ugly crown at her feet. “That was cheery. But we got what we need, so let’s get the fuck out of here, right?”

Together with the others, Morrigan followed the dwarf through the winding tunnel, hopefully leading back to Orzammar.

Chapter End Notes

Change Notes: Outside the dialogue at the beginning, I cut out and shortened a lot of canon scenes to not bore myself and my kind readers. Lenya isn't keen to keep to script anyway, so it fits well, imo. Couldn't help to make fun of the look of the crown (or Alistair's trap finding abilities) either. I mean... have you seen that ugly thing? xD Also, Morrigan/Lenya finally talked about the mirror, which canon dialogue i shortened and transformed to my usage too, of course. After all, we have all played the game enough, right? So no need to repeat things already known. Writing Morrigan's pov all the way through was so fun, though.

Next time: The return to Orzammar and wrapping up of this endless quest. Also snowball fights :D

Thanks to everyone reading my story and chapter update. Do consider leaving a kudos and/or comment, please. It would be most appreciated <3
Shadow Play

Chapter Summary

Back in Orzammar with Caridin’s crown in hands, Lenya and Alistair have to navigate the political landscape in wake of Harrowmont's assassination, misunderstandings and their shared desire to get the fuck away from all the stone overhead.

Chapter Notes

Back from my hiatus, mostly. I hope you all had a good start into 2020, the year where we finally finish more than one treaty in this story and publish chapters in a somewhat regular fashion, lol. Or so i hope xD

We are veering into nsfw here for one scene at the end, but since it is only implied and nothing graphic i don't think it warrants a rating change... yet. Just fyi and demi-Alistair ftw. Btw, the laughing scene of Lenya is inspired by Arya Stark here, so similarities are intended ;) Enjoy the update after it has been 84 years after the last one, tho? xD

Chapter Theme Song

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Due to the shortcut found by the durgen'len in Caridin’s chamber, the way back toward Orzammar went much quicker. Emerging from the tunnel behind them after weeks of travel, the red-glowing light of Orzammar was near blinding. Lenya blinked, momentarily shielded her eyes while her other companions emerged from the shaft behind her.

"I'm the ruler of the midgets now," Shale announced with a chuckle, still wearing the ugly crown on top of her stony head she had been tasked to carry. "I command you all to kill every bird in the sky!"

“Maker,” Alistair's laugh was one of disbelief, “I cannot believe we made it! We are back. Actually ba –“

“Wardens!” There was a new, stern voice she did not recognize. Clearing her sight with a final blink, her view remained blurry and thus the durgen'len in front of her an indistinguishable blob.

“Give me a fucking minute to adjust, okay?” she snapped, pushing the person approaching away. Not harshly enough to harm him, but Creators could he not invade her personal space? Nor demanding yet more of her when all she yearned for was to get the fuck away from everything?

“You haven’t spent months in this darkspawn-infested shithole, after all.”

“Three months, to be exact,” supplied the durgen'len asshole – Oghren – behind her. After saving them time in both way and battle, he somewhat deserved to be called by name now. He took a deep breath and released it audibly. “Orzammar, you sodding stinking den of politics and murder. Good
to be back. Never thought I would miss you.”

“The stink…” Morrigan sniffed, her tone offended. “Tis just you, filth.”

“Love ya too, witchy.” He barked out in laughter. “Ah, I can already taste the ale.”

“Shouldn’t we find the assembly first, get rid of that crown, so we can bathe?” Alistair halted, as if reconsidering his words. “Err, each on their own of course, but I’m dying to get out of that armor, burn my clothes and soak in scalding water for hours. And I would give my life for some decent food.”

“If only…” the witch scoffed. “Alas, you are still very much alive.”

“Not sure if you have heard of figure of –“

The durgen'len cleared his throat, his view now clearer to Lenya where her eyes had time to adjust. He was quite skinny and unassuming for a guard posted here, also due to the rather simple leather armor he was clad in. “Can you all be quiet for a minute?” he cut into their developing bickering and general chaos always present with her companions. “My name is Nevin Brosca…”

“How very nice for you,” Lenya said, pushing past him. Least she could use was some random durgen'len regaling her with his shitty life story. The ring of steel echoed within her ears and two other, more heavily armored and armed guards stepped into her way.

One of the durgen'len’s gaze flicked over to the golem, frowning. “Why is it wearing a… crown?”

“Did it not listen?” Shale drew out -its- her sigh. “I am its ruler now, so it better puts down these tiny, poking sticks if it doesn’t want to be squished by my royal fists.”

She was playing the role way too convincingly, enjoying it far too much. In turn, the guards’ posture had lost its former assurance and their blades rattled in their hands as they shook. Amusing.

“I have been tasked to wait for your return, Wardens.”

Morrigan crossed her arms. “Oh, and for what reasons, pray tell, dwarf?”

His eyes held her colder stare with ease. “To bring you to my lord and the future king, Bhelen Aeducan, of course. Due to your support for Harrowmont, however, this has to happen under custody.” He turned to Lenya. “So Warden, we can do this the easy way, meaning you follow me on your own accord. Or… I will have to use force.”

Blinking measured, Lenya threw a glance first at him, then at the two other, half-trembling guards, and back at Brosca. This was ridiculous. Who did he think he was? The absurdity of the situation took form in laughter bubbling up her throat until she released it right into his face. “You and whose army? These two durgen'len nearly pissing their pants?”

“Now, now, don’t be impolite, Len,” Alistair amended, biting back his own amusement, but failing. “After all, they come close to outnumbering us. Almost.”

Brosca rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue. There was an angular, thick brand snaking down his freckled cheek. A casteless working for nobility? That was odd. “Do not test me, Wardens. Nor think I would be so foolish to appear here in so little numbers.” He nodded toward the several crevices and corners behind them. It could be a feint laid out to make them believe the durgen'len was indeed well-prepared for their arrival in having more soldiers lying in wake, or the truth. Ugh, she was tired, not in the fucking mood to entertain –
“Excuuuuse meeee,” Alistair drawled the two words so much it gave away his irritability under the guise of humor. “Who died and made Bhelen king? Last time I checked we were working for Harrowmont, not your lord.”

“I have the full authority –“ Brosca stopped, in both, motion and words and gaped at him. “You haven’t heard then?”

“heard what?” Morrigan asked in his stead, glowered down at him.

“Of course… you couldn't have.” His long nose crinkled. “You have been away for so long, after all.”

“Out with it, dwarf!” she snapped.

“Harrowmont passed away, three weeks ago.”

What? All this fucking time and effort spent in the Deep Roads and only for this durgen'len – oh. Oh, no. Laughter rose up and broke free far quicker this time, there was no stopping it. It rippled through Lenya like waves, loud and detached it echoed in her own ears. Helpless against its force, she doubled over in a giggling snort.

Brosca turned to glare at Lenya. “What is so funny? He’d been poisoned by an outsider of both houses, a commoner girl you helped, Warden!”

"Oh… nothing," she managed, in between bouts of laughter, snapping for air. "Just the thought of us traipsing about this shithole for months on a wild halla chase for some inane paragon. Only to return to find the one tasking us with it dead. Pretty ironic, don't you think?" Lenya exhaled, dissipated the humor in this way. “Well, saves me to switch sides then.”

“You… what?”

“We discussed it, remember, puppy? Before the Deep Roads?”

“Huh… can’t say I do.” A frown furrowed his expression as he tried to recall details. “Wait… did you mean the letter that dwarven girl wrote, you showed to me? About Harrowmont and the casteless?”

While annoying, he was all but stupid and as such it was no surprise he was quickly able to remember. “Yesss,” Lenya replied, the word a near hiss. Her shoulders slumped. “Would have preferred to rest first, but we can hardly return to Harrowmont’s estate, right?” Brosca narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “Great, thought so. Fine, then lead me to your lord. It is about time we talk.”

“Lord Bhelen awaits you in his palace.” A heavily guarded place, no doubt. “Follow me, then.”

Only the two of them were permitted to enter a dimly lit room. After being searched and stripped off of all weapons, of course. Guess somebody here was afraid to confront them otherwise. The several armed guards standing in a row at each side of the wide room were just another proof for it.

Lenya rolled her eyes. Bhelen was either cautious or a coward, maybe both. At least he wasn’t an
idiot like his lackey, underestimating them. Good, at least that was already established between them and the rest would hopefully ensue right after. So she could leave, not only the palace and the diamond quarters, but Orzammar in a whole. Her return to the wide, open sky waiting beyond its gates was long overdue.

“What… no banquet or feast to celebrate our return?” Alistair asked into the stillness and clicked his tongue. “Disappointing.” Ugh the human and his need to fill silence –

“I’m afraid not, Warden,” came the unexpected answer from the other entrance across the room. Soon after a durgen'len and his entourage entered. Ah, Bhelen, then. At last. “Not yet anyway. We still have matters to discuss.”

The durgen'len was probably a few years older than they were, yet bore himself with a confidence as if he owned the place. Which, practically, was true, since they were in the palace. Otherwise, he was quite unremarkable. A younger, less docile version of Harrowmont, at best. Durgen'len nobility, if you had seen one, you had seen them all. How utterly boring.

“What matters?” Alistair asked in her stead, when she took too long to pick up on his cue.

Bhelen sat down in an ugly chair, befitting to the ugly crown she had retrieved from Shale at the last minute. Oh, was it a throne then? To showcase his power in front of them? How quaint. Bit like a male boar in mating season. Hopefully with less screaming, at least. "Your involvement in the poisoning of Harrowmont."

"Not sure you are aware," her fellow Warden scoffed, his tone biting. "...but we were kind of absent in Orzammar the past months."

"Well aware, I assure you, Warden." Oh good not a complete idiot like Harrowmont, then. Such a relief. Bhelen focused his attention on her. "Yet you did aid the perpetrator before the events of the Deep Roads, didn't you?"

"I also won a stupid tournament and killed off all the carta in Orzammar, my lord." Her eyes flinted at him. Enough with this charade. "What is your point? Shouldn't you be glad to have Harrowmont out of your way?"

Bhelen smirked. "Unfortunate what happened to my late father's friend, yes. Though it also ends this farce fortunately and I can take over my rightful place on my father's throne." He leaned forward, fixed her with a cold, knowing stare. "I ask because I would like to know to what degree I have to thank you for all this."

Someone she aided before? A commoner girl, how his lackey called her? Hmm… "Was the one responsible for Harrowmond's death someone who has a castless child, named Zerlinda?"

"Ah, so you do know her?" His counter-question was all but confirmation for her own suspicions.

"Never denied doing so." Lenya shrugged. "But I also never have tasked her with an elaborate assassination plot against your rival. Sorry to disappoint."

"So your loyalty to Harrowmont has never wavered, then?"

"I don't give a single fuck about Harrowmont! My loyalty is with myself alone! Now give me the sodding troops needed to fight the archdemon and its darkspawn army marching toward the surface!" Stemming her hands into her sides, she glared at him. "Since you were busy bickering with your rival you probably missed that there is a Blight going on."
"Ah," he chuckled. "It was all a means to an end, then. I suppose we do understand each other after all."

Bhelen was still an asshole, nothing new here. A ruthless one, at that. Like Branka he would throw his own people to the dread wolf if needed, but unlike that raving halla turd, he was one she could handle. Him not being insane helped a lot here. "Besides I intended to give the crown to you either way. Harrowmont's death saves me a lot of trouble and discussion. So all in all, I'm here where I intended to be."

Alistair inhaled to speak, but Lenya elbowed him to keep him quiet. Instead, the durgen'len standing next to Bhelen rose his voice, grasping her attention. He was familiar, but from where? "And we are supposed to believe that?" The man scoffed. "You are not here by choice, but because we are now the only one who can give you what you want!"

Ugh, right, it was this asshole. The one she punched for handing her forged documents in the assembly chambers, way back. No surprise he was hostile toward herself, then, but tough luck, boohoo. "No, because Orzammar is according to the treaties we possess obligated to aid in the time of a Blight, you idiot! Instead you all waste my … our," she corrected and gestured toward Alistair, "… time, literal months, with ridiculous tasks and excuses why we have to do this instead of fulfilling the treaty like you are supposed to do. Time we could have better spent collecting the other aid indebted within the treaties, time the archdemon used to grow its army." The rage burning inside whipped her forward, only to be stopped by a guard before reaching Bhelen. Still, her eyes fixed him over his guard's shoulder, words brought forth through gritted teeth. "You owe. You pay. Simple."

"Mind your tone, Warden!" yelled the asshole. His hand clasped around the hilt of his sword, ready to draw it. Pfft, if he wanted a fight he could have one. Even in a room full of guards, she would punch his ugly visage again, no problem. "You are speaking –"

"… not for me in this case, Vartag. Enough!" Bhelen interrupted him, leaving no room for discussion. He turned toward her right after, smirking. "I like you, Warden. You have guts. This can either get you killed early or very far in Orzammar."

Lenya crossed her arms. "The latter, naturally."

"So I noticed. From the glory of the Proving to the depth of the Deep Roads, you have prevailed." He shifted in his seat and leaned forward. "I don’t plan to change that, don’t worry. But certain precautionary measures," Bhelen nodded to the guards at each side. "… had to be taken, you understand. Pity we reach an agreement so late in nature and not under better circumstances. Yet I do plan to honor the Grey Warden treaty as a king, of course." Murmur erupted from the men behind him, which he silenced with a raise of his hand. "Just one more thing, Warden!"

She bit back the groan with some effort. "What now? Haven’t we done enough?"

"Yes, for Harrowmont, not for my lord," the asshole sneered in the background.

"Oh, so your lord will not profit from the absence of the Carta, nor from a paragon-supported bid for the throne, which will solidify his claim and silence his critics?"

Bhelen bestowed her sarcastic reply with a chuckle. "I will and as such my request is a minor one: What made you want to switch sides? Indulge me, Warden."

Fishing for compliments? How trite. "Not your name, bloodline, nor familial claim of the throne, I couldn't give a damn about these things. It was your view of the casteless people that differs vastly
from Harrowmont’s traditional approach.”

“Ah, yes, good observation,” he said, his tone and demeanor unbearably smug. “Old traditions like the caste system have no longer a place in our midst and are long overdue for revision. Shunning so many of our own people for the way they are born is a waste of resources for our city.” Coldly calculated reason, though it was to be expected he wouldn't change things out of sentimentality or the good of heart. “I have begun to fill my own ranks and vacancies with casteless people, as you might have noticed. And now as king I can work toward uniting our people even further. Everyone working against me now, is aiding the darkspawn.”

Alistair let out a nigh inaudible sigh behind her. “That is nice and all, can we, um, leave now? We just arrived from a several months’ long trek through the Deep Roads, and had no time to rest yet.”

“Which explains your… –“ Bhelen wrinkled his nose, created distance again in leaning back. Oh, the Princely was sensitive to smell, huh? “I allowed myself the freedom to let rooms be prepared for all of you here. I am certain you will find a hot bath and food agreeable right now.”

“As long it is not poisoned,” her fellow Warden muttered under his breath, only loud enough for her ears. “Yes, of course, my lord,” he said instead.

“Then it is settled. Let us officiate our alliance and my rule in the assembly tomorrow.” He pointed at the object at her feet. “Bring the crown, as the assembly likes the symbolic and the fact it is bestowed to me by Caridin, I am sure.” He gestured toward his men and another now familiar face appeared within. “Nevin will show you the way.”

Which was certainly out of the good of his heart and not meant as constant supervision. Lenya shared a look with Alistair. So much for speaking freely. Alistair shrugged and picked up this ugly bucket of a crown to take it back with them.

Bhelen’s lackey greeted them immediately upon leaving the main hall. “Follow me, then,” he said and motioned them to move.

Lenya fell in line and step with Alistair out of habit. “What about our weapons?”

Brosca glanced back at her. “They will be cleaned and sharpened for you, then returned. Don’t worry.” She threw Alistair another look. At least they had this heavy bucket to whack someone with, should everything else fail.

“And what about the girl, the one who poisoned Harrowmont? What happened to her?”

“Curious, are you?” He arched a bushy eyebrow. “As by the assembly’s judgement, Zerlinda has been sent into the Deep Roads.”

Her steps stumbled, then stopped. The blur of corridors swam further, begun to spin when memories flooded back to her. “You fucking idiots! You have no idea what you have done there!”

“What?” Brosca halted as well. There was a hand at her back, warm, stabilizing. “How dare you –“

“Broodmother. Ever heard of it?”
“I –” Surprised by the sudden force and ire he struggled for words. Good.

“Why are supposed secrets of the Wardens common knowledge and this is not?” It was a good thing Alistair carried the crown or else she would have – “This is what Zerlinda will become, thanks to you. She will grow, contort and then, then –“ Her voice cracked, the rage vanishing within a shudder rocking through her whole body.

“We fought such a creature during our time down there,” her fellow Warden explained, his voice distant as if underwater. “The paragon Branka had willingly sacrificed the members of her house, fed them to the darkspawn. The broodmother was also her, um, creation, in a way.”

“By the stone… there was always something off about her, but nothing to this extent. Is this why you killed her?” Brosca raised his lean shoulders to a shrug. “No judgment here, but otherwise she would have returned with you, were she still alive, aye?”

“She attacked us first. There was no other way.” A convenient lie, and not the first one this day. Some people needed to hear what they wanted to hear, like Bhelen. Or this durgen’len here. Alistair’s soft huff showed his disapproval of it. Too fucking bad, he had to deal with it.

“I see.” He turned a corner, slowed down in order to let them catch up. When they did, Brosca lowered his head and voice. “As such you will be pleased to know that I led Zerlinda out of the Deep Roads and to the surface, not much later. I know my way down there, from my time with the Carta.”

“She… was saved?” Puppy asked, as surprised as herself. “But why?”

“As you fittingly said, Wardens, she has done my lord and family a huge service, however unknowingly. Can’t have her dying there, then. Or, as you said, turn into something even worse.” Coming to a halt, he pointed at a wide door. “There is your chamber, Wardens.”

“Chamber? As in singular?”

While Alistair still sputtered, she opened the door to the room. Soft light spilled from it, a golden glow akin to candlelight. Lavish furniture carved from the stone itself adorned the room and yep, there it was, two beds. Or rather one very large one? Huh. Whatever. It had all she needed, and then some. Beyond that she lacked the energy to care, unlike the human puppy, as usual.

“Is something the matter, Warden?”

“Yes,” His voice went a bit shrill. “Am I supposed to share a room with my fellow Warden? This is, er, not appropriate.”

Lenya begun to unbuckle the fastenings of her armor and turned toward the two at the entrance. This she had to see. Alistair’s face was adapting a deeper auburn shade as he stumbled over his words in order to explain how they were colleagues but not lovers. Agreed, because eww. However who had time to get worked up about what appeared to be a honest mistake? Humans were weird.

“It is okay,” she announced into the awkward silence with a shrug, and continued to dress down. She kicked her boots into two opposite corner of the wide room. “Bed is large enough, we can share. Stop making a fuss, puppy.”

“It is not okay, Lenya!” The redness seemed to eradicate and fully take over his warm brown skin. “And please, stop undressing as if you are alone!”

“Nothing you haven’t seen before, puppy.” She let out a snort and got rid of her armored leggings.
Oof, they reeked. Like the rest of her, alas. Time to sit in some hot asswater to clean up, as the room was equipped with a large enough tub. That one she didn’t plan to share, however. “Besides, as soon I had time to bathe, you can have that room for all I care. I’m keen to get away from all the rock overhead anyway.”

“So you two are colleagues, just fellow Warden, you said?”

“Y-yes.” Alistair cleared his throat and closed the door, with him on the wrong side. Or the correct one as it was immediately much quieter. Well, his loss, then. Shrugging, she walked over to the bathtub in order to fill it with a wave of her hand. Time to get rid off weeks’ worth of Deep Road dirt, at last.

Great, now his food would end up poisoned for sure, since he made such a fuss. But how could he stay in one room alone with Lenya? These days it was already distracting enough when she was nearby, or walking next to him, like all these weeks on their way back to Orzammar.

Sighing, Alistair sank to the ground, leaning his back against the rough wall behind him. The hallway was dimly lit and Brosca argued in some distance with somebody, but it was safe. No distorted monster nor darkspawn lurked around its corners, there was no reason nor need for vigilance. If they had no other room for him, he would rest here then, whatever. His eyes drooped shut and the dwarf’s words dwindled to an indiscernible background din as he drifted off to sleep.

Something wet and weighty startled him awake not much, or hours later – who knew? Heart racing, he reached for his weapon in instinct, but of course it was no longer there. Probably for the best as stinky dog-breath fanned at his face and a wet tongue licked across his cheek. Forcing his eyes open, Alistair was met with Revas waaay too up close to him. Wagging his stumpy tail so hard his whole bottom shook in the motion, the mabari whined far more high-pitched than his size should permit.

Alistair tried to shield his face from the onslaught of sloppy dog kisses, with little to no success. “Happy to see you too –”

“Revas!” There was another, also familiar voice calling out for him. “You –” she stopped, in both, motion and words, and gasped out. “Alistair...” Her steps hastened and then she stood in front of him. Well probably, because Revas’ mass was blocking his sight. Not that seeing Leliana mattered much, but Maker he was so glad she was still here and hadn’t left yet. “… you are back!”

He shoved the muscled hound from his lap, in order to look up to her. Revas wasn’t bothered by it, instead he simply continued to jump up and down in joy. “Yep, only an hour ago, or so.”

“I heard the servants’s murmur and –” The mabari halted, sniffed the air and made a sharp u-turn toward the door. “What is the matter?”

“He must smell Lenya, beyond that door.”

“She is back, too? I –” Leliana leant down to his sitting height and wrapped him in a tightembrace. He stiffened at the suddenness of it. “… am so glad. I was afraid I would have to –” Yeah they had been edging on the time limit given to her, if they hadn’t been already passed it. Thankfully Leliana had the grace to wait a bit longer, perhaps unwilling to believe them dead. “I didn’t want to leave.”
Ah. There was the admission. He patted her back, once or twice. It was a bit awkward to be hugged, sitting like that. “I’m happy you haven’t yet.” Alistair tried to withdraw, but she held on and awkward shifted to slightly uncomfortable. “Um… air? Please?” Also boundaries, yet he didn’t voice that thought.

She let go, sniffling a bit. And not only due to his lack of bath, hopefully. “Sorry. I was just so worried.”

Revas pawed and scratched at the stone-carved door, his loud whine redirecting both of their attention. “Would you… let him in? I think he is eager to see a certain someone.” The mabari barked in reply.

“Okay...” Leliana wiped at her eyes and opened the door just far enough for Revas to fit, or rather, stampede, through. Such a large dog, such quickness. Odd. She closed it after him again but his keening was even droning through the thick door. “Is there a reason why you are sitting here in the hallway?”

Several, in fact. First was Lenya undressing, readying herself to clean up and – no that was it. Large enough reason, anyhow, since he wouldn’t survive staying in a room with her being naked, as one did when bathing. Not to mention to share a bed, however well-meant by her. It wasn’t appropriate and – why was he so hot all the sudden? “Alistair?”

He cleared his throat. “Well, they assigned us only one room assuming we... –”

Her giggle interrupted his sentence from completion. “I see. And? Are you now both –“

“I’m sitting outside here, am I not?” he replied, more harshly than needed. He licked his lips, shook his head a little. “Sorry, I’m tired, stinky and cranky. Much has happened in the Deep Roads, but I would love to postpone discussing it to another day.”

“I understand, Alistair. Perhaps I can aid to accelerate the matter of you, well, not having to sleep in the hallway. Maker knows, the palace has enough unoccupied rooms.”

He was tempted to ask how she landed here, with Bhelen, and what she did all these months in Orzammar, yet ultimately kept quiet. She’d heeded his wish, no need to change it now. Leliana went around the corner, to wherever Brosca had vanished to, hopefully not leaving him sitting here in the hallway. Or maybe she would, but then he would stay here and rest, unless the archdemon –

“It is done,” she announced, shaking him out of his lethargy. “Follow me.”

That was… quick. She noticed his confusion. “Ah, I didn’t do more than ask, the servants were already in a hurry to correct their mistake on Nevin’s order. His sister is delightful by the way. Smart and kind. Also the mistress to Bhelen, I should add.” That explained... why Brosca had the trust of Bhelen. Arriving at a simple door, she gestured toward the room beyond. “ It is not as luxurious like the other room, but –“

“As long it has a bed and a bath, I’m good.”

“I’ll leave you be, then.” Leliana smiled. “Talk to you later?” He nodded, too tired for further words, and left her behind in closing the door after himself.
The chant reverberated inside, a cruel loop played over and over. Cold eyes stared back at him, dead, bones broken. But instead Nithius’ blue, they were green now and then she twisted... grew.

Heart racing, Alistair snapped awake, splattering tub water on marbled ground. He drove a dripping hand through his face, frowning as his fingers had pruned. How much time had passed? How long had he been nodded off? It must have been a while, since the prior nigh-scalding water was now only tepid at best. Grimacing, he rubbed his aching neck and rolled his shoulders. Not the best position, nor place to sleep in, yet much needed, it seemed. Leaning forward, Alistair renewed the water with a flick of his hand and sighed contented as it got replaced by clean, hot water. These runes were the best invention the dwarves ever made. No exception. What was the harm in continuing to soak for a bit anyway? After the nightmare, It seemed to be the best course of action.

And that was all it had been. Just a dream, conjured by bad memories. Lenya was safe, in the other room or already topside. This was what counted, was important. Her safety. Not that she needed his or any help in this regard, as she had proven time and time again. Smiling, he leaned back, dunking his head underwater. Reaching for the soap after emerging, he lathered his hair and skin once more. It couldn't hurt to repeat this process, especially after such a long time without the ability to clean himself. The warm water eased the ache in his muscles, in spite of the tub being a bit too small for his height and long legs. No surprise he earlier had dozed off then, given the comfortableness so direly missed all these months.

Going through the motions of cleaning let his mind wander. Maker, neither crazed paragon, ancient golem nor would-be kings could stop or impress Lenya on the way to her goal. She was her own person, fully and always. Frustrating as it sometimes had been, particularly in the beginning, it was an admirable trait pushing him forward, challenging him. She possessed the confidence and guts he too often lacked and the way she’d talked with Bhelen earlier had been just another example of that. For a solid minute it looked as if she would either launch herself at Bhelen or his lackey. Alistair chuckled softly. Of course. Of course she would have done that, dozens of guards in spite. Once angered enough, there was no stopping her. Not that there was any way in general to halt her once in motion. She was a force of nature on her own.

Alistair exhaled, a bit more shaky than moments before. This was part of his attraction to her, wasn’t it? As it was only a part and aspect of her, the softer side less apparent, hidden away. More precious, when shown. He submerged his head back underwater as if doing so could distract him from the flutter within his stomach. Nope, it was still there, perhaps even worse than before. Ironic how all the tragedy and death had led them here, together. Not together together, of course, that would never happen. But without it all they’d have never met, never shared these moments. Like the ones in the Deep Roads, either faux-cloudgazing or consoling each other after the broodmother, after losing Nithius. She had been so beautiful in both of these times and in many before that. And he should really really not think of her in this way. But no, of course he did and could not stop, because his mind obviously hated him. Why else this single-minded focus on her lately, on everything she did and the way she moved, whether in battle... or not?

Pressing his lips together, he stifled the small sound bubbling up his throat, along with the heat coursing through him. Maker, this was new, too. This want, a feverish rush of emotions not present since coming of age, back in the monastery. It hadn’t been there much the past years, either lacking time or interest for it. Now however it was back, with a force and intensity prior unbeknownst to him. His hand underwater moved faster, when had it even slipped there? No matter, caught in the desire surging, Alistair’s head lolled backwards. Eyes closed, the quick breathing and heartbeat droned out any other sound, heavy in his ears. Back then as teen, the sole focus had been on the mounting pressure in his stomach, on chasing more of that feeling and the release alone. No time or
Alistair looked down and grimaced. Rushing to clean up, he belatedly replied. “Y-yes, what is it?”

“The dwarven woman blinked and gaped at him, while the second guy let out a faint snicker. “Seemed we come at an ill-opportune time, Warden.” What? He touched his cheek. Was his face still flushed?

“More the right one, really. I, um, lack any clothes right now.” Shrugging, the dwarf carrying the large backpack pushed past Alistair into the room.

“That I see… –” Eyelashes fluttering, she cleared her throat and looked away. “I mean, where shall I put down the bundle of clothes?”

“On the bed is fine.” They did their job, quietly and discreet, and yet it was as if he was under their scrutiny, like he’d been back as a teen by the sisters in the monastery. He’d done nothing wrong, obviously, despite the Chantry trying to tell him otherwise for years on end, it was natural. Why the shame about it, then?

Both dwarves ushered out without sparing him another glance, taking the emptied plates of food along with them. Alistair closed the door behind them and re-bolted it. No need for someone walking in on him – it was because he made it about her, wasn’t it? Andraste’s ashes, hours ago he went on how staying in one room with Lenya would be inappropriate and yet – He grimaced. Yeeeah. Bit disrespectful, that. She deserved bett – A shiver disrupted his thoughts. Right, he could wallow in his embarrassment later, had enough practice in it, after all. Now it was time to dry off and get dressed. Everything else had to wait, even the crisp mountain air and open sky beyond Orzammar’s gates.
The ending is a bit flaky, since i had to split the chapter off here. It had grown too large and long to include the promised snowball fight. Sorry. But next time, really. For now, let me thank you once more for reading my chapter update. Also let me know what you think? Any comments, thoughts and input is most welcome, as is leaving kudos <3

Change Notes: Hmm, basically everything is new, in particular the inclusion of Brosca but also scrapping another boring canon scene in favor of meeting Bhelen in a different way, heh. The scene of solo Alistair is basically there to showcase his growing desire he becomes worse and worse denying. It will be part of his arc for up to the mage tower (and beyond.) You will see ;)

Next time: The long awaited snowball fight and many other shippy things, as this is a Lenyastair focused chapter that we all want and deserve ;)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter Summary

Alistair decides to spend the night in front of Orzammar's gates with Lenya upon her refusal to return back inside with him.

Chapter Notes

This chapter took me waaaay longer to write than expected, damn. I hope it was worth the wait tho. Solely centered around Lenya's feelings for her. Enjoy?

Night had fallen outside of Orzammar’s gates, which was a blessing in disguise. No need to deal with direct sunlight after months down in darkness, thankfully. Though the surroundings were still made bright by a thick blanket of snow covering the ground beyond the gates’ steps. So much that Alistair needed to shield his eyes for a bit, and his intake of fresh air – fresh air! – were released in a shudder. It had turned winter indeed and even with his heavy woolen tunic found in between the bundle of clothes, the cold nipped at his skin. No complains here, at least not many. Because standing here was proof that they made it, lived through the harrowing time in the Deep Roads. His face fell, the elation about it short-lived. Unlike Nithius, who found his untimely death and eternal grave down there. At least he got a proper goodbye and cremation, would not rot along the darkspawn corpses. Not like he would have to, some day in the future, upon his own Callin –

Peals of laughter pierced through and shattered these grim thoughts. Exhilarating and bright it was, like her taint thrumming through his veins with her presence. Of course she would be here, outside and finally free from all the heavy stone overhead. Of course she would be here, outside and finally free from all the heavy stone overhead. It only made sense. His feet moved on their own volition down the stairs and further, drawn to the sound as though he were a moth pulled to a flame. Revas barking wasn’t less loud nor happy, being reunited and playing with his mistress in the snow.

Lenya paused, noticing him too, her grin only half-visible in the dark. Alistair raised his hand to a greeting and in return was met with a pinpoint snowball to his face. Ruuuude. He stumbled back a bit and sputtered out the portion of snow having found its way into his mouth, while her laughter only increased in volume and intensity.

“Good catch, puppy.”

So that’s how it would be, huh? Fine, she could have that. And he his revenge. Freeing his face from the cold remains, he dived down to scoop up a handful of snow and threw it at her. His aim was surprisingly true upon first try, but she still managed to duck away at the last moment. Lenya retaliated quickly, yet lopping it too high at him to hit.

Alistair snorted. “I’m a big guy, but not that tall.” Revas bounced around them, nose snuffling in freshly fallen flakes with his wagging butt high up in the air. Alas, the mabari served as distraction long enough for Lenya to hit him again. Such a cheat, of course he would support his mistress.
Alistair shook off the new flurry of snow marring him. “Two against one? Not fair!”

She rolled her eyes at him and sighed, both overly dramatic. “Don’t be such a da’len.”

Da’len? His knowledge of elvhen was basically nonexistent, though she had used it enough for him to make the correct connotations. It meant child, kid. And that he was, in this moment. No longer twenty and a Warden burdened with an overwhelming task, but a boy free to roam in the snow like back in Redcliffe, so long ago. And so was she, laughing and nearly squealing with joy like the girl she once was before all this, even as he hit her square at the head with one lucky shot. The soft snowball burst open upon impact, showering her with crystalline flakes that glinted in the moonlight. Her boots crunched in the hardened snow on the ground as she sidestepped and ducked under the barrage of ammunition lopped at her, always laughing and wonderfully carefree. To see her like this, truly happy, open and caught up in this moment of unaltered silliness was a marvel and gift alike.

Alistair’s heart twisted with the want for more of that, to ease her burden placed upon her, outside their snowball warfare. … Always. Ducking to the side to avoid her retaliation, he stowed away the want back into the corner it emerged from. Of course it wasn’t as easy as that, not anymore, and so it disobeyed its banishment. Defiantly, the warmth in his chest continued to bloom like the grin in his face, now spread as wide as hers. His fingers were deep chilled to a point where they no longer wished to bend around the snowballs formed, but no matter, because this here, that moment mattered more.

One of his missiles hit the back of her neck and Lenya froze by the sheer shock of cold for a second or two. Enough time for Alistair to still too and let down his guard as he approached her. A mistake as it turned out, since she whirled with a smirk and handfuls of snow to charge at him. Revas barked again and again, as if cheering her on. All he could do to avoid this gruesome frosty fate was using the force of movement against her in catching and spinning her around in his arms. Then, he threw her into the loose pile of snow aside the road. Standing over her, he gloated in secure believed triumph.

“Hah. You won’t fool me that eeeeeeasyyy –“ The air escaped his lungs upon the impact with the ground, when she hooked under and kicked away his leg. Yep, in hindsight he should have expected that from her, as resourceful as she always was. The pain and cold seared through his back, but was quickly forgotten when she reemerged on top of him. Staring down at him like he did at her just a moment ago, her lips curled into a cocky smile.

“I have won, puppy.”

That she did, in more ways than one. Ears still ringing from the fall, his accelerated breath mingled in white puffs with hers, rising to the black horizon above. The freezing ice-water started to seep through the heavy wool of his tunic at his back. It would be so easy to free himself, to turn the tide, given their disparity in strength. And yet, he did not move, nor wanted to. The snow caught in the tousled strands of her hair began to melt and drip down on him. Her gaze on him lingered, changed into something questioning with a frown. Oh crap, he took too long to reply, made things weird.

He cleared his throat, licked his lips, which in turn directed his attention on hers, still quirked up in a smile and oh-so tempting. Maker’s breath. He could never, shouldn’t and yet the world seemed to halt and she became the sole focus of it. “I guess you have…” he said, too breathless and too forced. Well, better that than doing something very and utterly stupid.

Her eyebrow arched up at his unusual tone, but her reply was cut off as a barrage of snow hit them with a doggy huff. Revas did not take kindly to being left out and the dog burrowing them in snow was his punishment. Sputtering and shaking off the icy flakes, Alistair sat up, the spell between
them broken. A fitting punishment indeed, as well as a saving grace. For the cold nipping and biting at his skin soothed the want simmering beneath the surface, and with it this stupid impulse. At least for now. He exhaled, slowly, shuddering.

What was he thinking to even **think** about that? This could, **would** never happen, since Lenya –

“Need a hand, puppy?” she asked, shrugging off the last vestiges of snow with an all too smug Revas at her side. Of course she was already back up on her feet, while he was still sitting on the frozen ground wallowing in the impossibility of –

“I’ll manage,” he replied; a lie to assuage himself, and stood up on his own. But his boot slipped on frozen ground as he put weight on it and he skittered, stumbled forward, right into her arms like a hapless maiden. It was by sheer chance or will – or both – that Lenya managed to halt his fall instead of causing them both to tumble back down. The grip of her hands around his arm were firm, stabilizing. And while the fingers were as cold as his, her touch still let roil a wave of warmth through him. Alistair stepped away to create distance between them again and cleared his throat. “I, um, solved that with my usual elegance. My… thanks.” Where was the lake of ice-water to drown in when you needed one?

Lenya only shrugged and turned away to give Revas the attention he’d vied for. The exhale of breath made came through chattering teeth. She was cold, because of course she would be, on top of a mountain with its biting wind and chill reaching down to the bones. The drenched clothes from the snowball fight certainly did not help matters. “Best we return back inside, Len.”

“No.” Her back squared, emphasizing the defiance in that singular word. Her fingers burrowed deeper into Revas’ equally wet fur. “I don’t want to. Not tonight. Not after –” Air hissed past her teeth in a mixture of coldness and pained memories.

Ah. Lenya didn’t want to revert back to be buried under stone after her return outside, with an open, starred sky overhead. As much it didn’t make sense in the freezing temperatures, it made sense for her. “You want to spend the night outside?

“As you said, I’ll manage. I lived through worse conditions.”

“Yes, but I also said that before stumbling and nearly causing you to fall back down with me. You shouldn’t take me as an example, Len.”

“Huh,” she huffed, his humor falling flat. “No one forces you to stay here with me, puppy.”

“But what if… I want to?” The question was posed before he could stop himself and he winced a bit in its wake. “I mean, after all these months… it is just nice to be outside again, right?

“Yeah...” Lenya breathed more than spoke, her gaze toward the sky above. “It is.”

“If a bit cold,” he added with a far too nervous chuckle. “Tell you what, you stay here and I go back inside to catch a few things so we don’t freeze to death overnight. Can’t have Ferelden’s last Wardens turning into ice-figures, after all.”

“We?” She turned to him, eyebrow raised. “Fine. Whatever. As long you don’t talk my ears off.”

He pointed at the reddened tips of her ears. “Given enough time and lack of equipment, I fear the cold will already do that.”

With a small gasp, Lenya reached up to feel them. Then, she untied her messy bun, letting the long strands of blond hair fall back over her ears, and rubbed them both with the palms of her hands.
“Ugh.”

Her attempt to warm her ears this way was nothing short of endearing. “Wait here, okay? I’ll be back as quickly as I can manage.” With that, Alistair rushed toward the steps and gates, to return back underground. Though it wouldn’t be for long.

If the guards were annoyed at leaving him in and out through the gate, they had the grace to remain silent. “Sorry...” Alistair said nonetheless, half to the guards, half to Brosca, who was as buried under the load of equipment as he himself was. “I appreciate your help. wouldn’t have managed it on my own.”

The dwarf let out a gruff grunt. “Obviously. I do not understand your wish to camp outside when you have rooms in the palace at your disposal.”

“Yes, well...” How did Lenya manage to start a fire, and that so quickly in this less than ideal weather condition? The moment Bhelen lifted the embargo, nearly all the merchants prior occupying the plateau in front of Orzammar’s gates had taken their business inside the mountain. Thus there were no people she could have asked for aid in building a campfire. Not that she needed someone’s help, and yet ... he hadn’t been gone for very long, had he? The fire she hunched over was still in its infancy, but she kindled it in the right intervals with routinized steps. The twigs sizzled and popped when added and the flames roared up and grew as they devoured the new fuel. The light and warmth of it drew him in, the bite of smoke in his nose familiar, wanted.

“Oh, I see.” Brosca laughed roughly and pushed past him to unload his handful in front of the fire. “Got a date with the lady.”

“I – nooo!” Alistair protested with a whine, which only spurred the dwarves’ amusement in form of a snort.

“Don’t see how this is different to sharing a room with your fellow Warden you were so opposed to,” Brosca paused to look up with a grimace. “Not sticking around to find out, though. That open sky makes me queasy. Shrugging off the last equipment, the dwarf whirled around, eager to return into the mountain. “Don’t elope into the sunset or some shit. Got a big day tomorrow the both of you, as does my lord.” He raised his hand over his shoulder without turning around, to casually wave them goodbye. “Goodnight, Wardens. See ya.”

Then, he was alone with her. Not alone alone, mind, since there were the guards and Revas, but still. It was a moment where he wistfully looked after the dwarf disappearing within Orzammar’s heavy gates. Focus! This wasn’t any different to the times they have camped under the stars, why would be it now? Except that it was freezing cold and the wind howled through the mountain’s many cracks and crevices. But that was what the supplies were for, right? The fire’s warmth helped too, small as it still was.

“Alistair...” The call of his name snapped him out of… whatever that was and back to her. “What is all this? You want to stay a week here?”

Sheepishly, he shrugged off the backpack and put it down in front of him. “No? I just wanted to make sure we don’t freeze to death tonight. We already established that, didn’t we?”

The unwanted effect of the sharpness in his tone showed within the narrowing of her eyes. Great.
Once more aptly done by him. “No one forces you to be here, puppy.” Revas at her side gave an agreeing bark and a warning growl.

“Right, I know. Sorry. I guess I panicked and brought, well, everything I deemed useful? It wasn’t winter when we went into the mountain, after all.” Three months later, the world had turned into ice and snow, a glimmering blanket of white. In a way, it was beautiful, particularly how the full moon’s light and the stars reflected within it.

“True, the nights will be harsher during this season and hunting more difficult.” Lenya shrugged. “Nothing what equipment, skill and preparation couldn’t negate, though. Been there, done that,” she said, rifling through the supplies for the bedrolls he packed. “Do tend to the fire, while I prepare our sleeping place, yeah?”

Only that they did lack the suitable equipment for winter, but this was a point to discuss with Bhelen tomorrow, not now. Now they would make due with what they had – under the stars and open sky, free from all the stone at last. Well, sort of open sky, to be honest, since the merchants that went into Orzammar left a few things behind that probably were too troublesome transporting. Among them was a rickety wooden stall with a makeshift canvas roof as a shield from the elements over it.

Under said roof, Lenya spread out the bedrolls on layers of fir boughs she’d collected, and some furs he’d brought. That should keep them mostly warm and dry from the snow around and above them. Though the space on which the bedrolls were placed was a tight fit, not made with a bulky human such as himself in mind. That could be a problem later.

Lenya noticed his gaze lingering on the questionable construct above her. “It is more sturdy than it looks. And the mountain wall in our backs will help to retain most of the fire’s heat,” she explained, nodding. “If we sit close to the wall, the biting wind won’t be much of a problem either.”

“You really thought this through, huh?” Crouching down to the campfire situated away from the stall, he picked up some twigs and sticks from a pile and threw them in there, one by one. “Anyway, how did you even manage to build and ignite a fire this fast? I wasn’t gone this long, right?”

“Don’t worry, puppy.” Her back turned to him, she wryly chuckled. “Although my father was a mage, I did not burst out a flame from the tips of my fingers all the sudden.”

“Would be useful that, wouldn’t it? And make you even more terrifying, if that is even possible.”

“Sure, but I don’t need magic to achieve these things, contrary to popular belief.” What was this sudden bitterness in her voice about? She pointed toward the satchel on the ground next to the cut firewood, where a hatchet stuck in a split, long log. “I did not come out here as unprepared as you think I have, human. I know how to handle this weather and brought equipment.”

“I can see that. After all, you have proven time and time again how very capable, deathly and frightening you are, even without magic.” And beautiful. The thought was unbidden, yet swirled around in his head, like a secret. The worst kept kind, for it was obvious to everyone with eyes, really. Alistair glanced away from her, back into the flames that steadily grew with the fuel added. He allowed himself a smile, another secret. “Without you, we wouldn’t have come so far. Especially not in the Deep Roads.”

She made an abrupt motion in his peripheral vision when he mentioned that place, but seemed to relax again after releasing her breath. “I wasn’t the only Warden down there, thankfully. Stop
"I’m not –“ He stopped himself with an exhale. Arguing with her was pointless, after all. “Thank you,” he said instead. “You are still the much better leader, though.”

“I know.” Humbleness, false or otherwise wasn’t her strong suit either, nor did it need to be. She was stating facts, aware of her strengths. “Yet you won’t get away from this, no matter how much pointless flattery you throw my way. You have seen the archdemon and its army. I’m not doing this shit on my own.”

“What makes you think I would do that, Len?” He added a larger piece of wood to the fire to distract himself from the pang of hurt blooming in his chest. After all this and what they had been through, she still did not trust him enough? “Did I ever give you any reason to believe I would leave you behind?”

She shrugged halfheartedly, her whisper nearly swallowed by the sizzling and popping of the wood devoured by the flames as they roared to life. “Yeah, people tend to do that.”

“Well, I won’t, Len!” Alistair straightened with the declaration, louder than intended. Whatever, it needed to be heard, be understood. “Listen, I know your clan is gone from Ferelden by now and you miss them, but it also means they are safe from the Blight, right? And you can do your best to protect them from it here in continuing with our task.” He lowered his voice again, his words softer, less forceful. “With me at your side, as long you will have me.” This was the closest he would ever get to confess his feelings to her, ironically. However this wasn’t about his infatuation or unnamed things beyond that, but her believing him, about trust.

His cheeks warmed more with every second of silence passing between them. Way to make a fool out of himself… again. “I know,” Lenya replied eventually and turned with a shaky exhale. A smile flitted across her lips. “I’m stuck with you, puppy. Guess there are worse fates.”

Oh. Oh no, the things her words and smile could do to his poor heart. Maker have mercy. It jumped in his chest, left him breathless for longer than he cared to count. Now his cheeks were even warmer and – he cleared his throat, averted his eyes. “Although your clan is gone for now, that doesn’t mean they won’t return when it is all over. We only have to ensure they will have a place to return to. Either way I’m certain your father will be very proud of you.”

Sitting down on the bedroll, she tugged the newly donned cloak closer around herself to imprison the warmth within. “My… father?”

Did he say something wrong? “The... keeper of your clan… right?”

She grimaced. “Late Keeper, yes.”

Oh. Damn. He was such an idiot. He should just stop speaking and never start again. It would be the best for everyone. “I’m sorry, I thought –“ His mouth closed with a plop and he buried his head into his hands.

“Don’t be. He died before I was born, so I never knew him. That we have in common, I guess.”

The proverbial bone thrown by her mitigated his shame a bit and he looked back up. “Still, my condolences. I had not known –“

“Well, you or one of your family was among the shem’alas who killed him, you don’t have to give me any, nor could you have known. It is all a moot point anyway, long in the past.”
Her candor left him at loss for words. Probably for the best, given how he ruined things when using them. How should he bounce back from that topic to another anyway? Sorry your parent was brutally murdered by my kind, here have a cup of tea? Maker! Not that he had any tea to begin with, but oh. Yeah. He had that, though. And it was about time she would get it. But where – Turning, he searched the small pockets of his backpack to find the object he had stowed there since the Deep Roads.

Revas looked up from Lenya’s lap, when Alistair approached his fellow Warden. Of course the mabari had lost no time to get comfortable. “Here. Open your hand.”

Lenya frowned up at him. “What is it?”

He let the delicate chain trickle into her hand. “It is… from Nithius, thought you would want to have it, to remember him by. Also… it looked Dalish.”

The frown shifted from him toward the jewelry in her hand. The firelight reflected in her elven eyes, more so as they grew bigger with recognition. “Dirthamen… The god of secrets.”

“What?”

“The silver pendant. Two ravens, one at each side. It is his symbol, among others. Guess Nithius had some secret to keep.” Her shoulders sank with her exhale. “One that is now forever lost to Dirthamen. We should have never taken him with us to the Deep Roads.”

His boots crunched in the snow as he halfway froze in his motions. A twinge twisted his insides, guilt its reason. Without a doubt, this was a feeling they shared, right now. “Perhaps, yeah. Yet it was also his decision to come with us, was it not?”

“More like that of Harrowmont.” She scoffed. “Asshole.” Her ire shifted toward him. “Can’t you finally sit down? You towering over me like that makes me twitchy. And you don’t want that, believe me.”

Nothing like a good old threat of violence to make him comply immediately. Which explained why he was now sitting next to her on the other bedroll. Revas eyed him, daring him to come any closer than that. Great. The mabari would then probably turn him into his next snack. Alistair scooted a bit away from the impending danger and Lenya, though more often than not they were the same lately. “I don’t want to return to the Deep Roads!”

“What do you mean?” The admission was sudden, surprising. It was not his favorite place either, far from it, but as Wardens they had hardly much choice in the matter.

Her sigh became visible as a puff of smoke rising to the night sky. “That thing, they talked about prior to where we went to the shith – Deep Roads. What happens to Wardens.”

Oh. “You mean The Calling?”

“Yes. That.” She fixed the amulet in her hand with a stare. “I don’t want to die there, rotting away among these bastards, like Nithius. The choice how I want to live my life has been already taken away from me, I refuse to let what I have become even dictate how I will die.”

“Well, it is tradition –“

“Fuck tradition!” she burst out with a trembling force. “It is unnatural to be buried under all this stone instead the open sky! The Wardens have already taken everything from me. Let me at least die free!”
Staring at the stars twinkling above, he blinked faster to clear his eyes. Best to calm the situation down, anything to get her from talking about her own demise so easily. Yes, death was all around them, each day a struggle to survive. But it did hurt, the thought of losing her. As linked they were together in fate to this task as integral she’d become to his life in general. Not only as fellow Warden, but all the more as person to support, to be at her side.

You love her.

These three words shot through his mind and he grimaced, pushed them away. It didn’t make it less true of course, but love? It was such a big, scary word with an intricate meaning and he had never – The sigh escaped him at its own volition. Duncan had warned him, hadn’t he? Well, too late now, too late for any of that, for everything. “– but you don’t have to follow it, Len. I’m sure ending a Blight will give you enough leeway with the dwarves to decide about that for yourself. So…” He swallowed, thickly. “Let’s focus on that, first, yeah?” Less morbid topics would be great, too!

“Right…” she breathed, her voice almost lost to the biting wind that picked up around them. It howled like wolves in the distance and the flames of their campfire sputtered in protest. Alistair shivered in unison with her, their cloaks not thick enough to stave off all of winter’s chill. “Fen’Harel is on the prowl tonight too, it seems. Asshole.” In between chattering teeth, she laughed to herself, as if the joke was a secret only she would understand. Which, well, was true, but it was too cold anyway to give it any further thought.

Alistair stood up and put three thick logs into the fire on his way to his goal: his backpack. He’d packed some heavy woolen blankets for each of them. That, along with the fire renewed and the wall in their backs, should keep them warm enough. Searching for them both, he was only able to find one. “Um, is there a blanket among the things Brosca carried?”

Rustling ensued, as she got up and searched the pile, then an agonizing pause. “Nope.” One simple word and yet enough to instill cold dread within his stomach. Of all the things to forget to pack it had to be this vital item? Damn.

“Oh. I… better go and fetch the other blanket then. The night is too cold without it.”

“Why? We can share the one we have.”

No. No. No. They could not, or he would die being this close to her. Of embarrassment and because his poor heart would explode, leaving a bloody mess in the untouched snow around them. Nobody could want that. “It is no bother. I’ll be back quickly!”

Lenya let out a snort. “I bet the guards will murder you if you ask them to open the gates yet again.”

Worth the risk! “That is what they are there for, right?”

“Noooot exactly! As the word ‘guard’ implies, they are there for the exact opposite, puppy. Like it or not, you are stuck outside with me until dawn.”

Which he chose to be… just not that. He whirled around, took one, two hasty steps and practically threw the blanket at her, burying her underneath. Revas wiggled free from it like an over-sized worm, his nose snuffling on the ground. “Then you take it, Len. I’m a big guy, I will manage.”

Resurfacing from it as well, she gave him a baleful stare. “Why is this such a big deal?” Oh, for several reasons, for once – “You know, the first rule of winter for Dalish is, well, score enough
“game, but right after that, share warmth whenever you can.”

His heart skipped a beat at that, or several. Traitor. “You would… share? With meee?” What are you doing, mouth? Stop!

“All these useless words to arrive where we started, ugh.” Lenya wrapped the blanket around her, motioning to the empty space beside her. “Sit. Down. Human!”

Again, as if under a spell, he complied. Or maybe he was simply very very very good in following orders. Huh. Of all the times to discover a new talent, this was the worst one. As the blanket touched his shoulder, fitting around comfortably, and his other one touched Lenya’s – Maker! – cold wasn’t an issue anymore. Not in the slightest. The rush of heat bursting through him in waves set every spot on his body ablaze. Any moment now he would ignite like the campfire in front of them, just you wait! And even if not, what to do with his hand brushing up against her back? He bunched his shoulders in order to make himself smaller, but it wasn’t enough. Best to stop moving – and breathing – too! When would dawn come, exactly?

“There. Not so hard, was it?”

A whimper, not unlike Revas’ whining, escaped him as involuntary reply.

“Creators, don’t be such a da’len about it!” she huffed, her eyes narrowing. “Or is this a modesty thing too? I can never tell with you humans.”

No, more a ‘I’m in love with you’ thing. Fortunately, this option was far from her mind, always would. Oh, great. Such a cheery thought. This was exactly why he tried to keep this crush at bay, denying it until it was too late, grew too large to do so. “It is stupid, I know,” Alistair said and let his face fall into his open palm with a huff of his own. Hopefully this would cover up his blush, which did not stop at his face this time. Or ever did, for that matter.

“It is.” Lenya nodded, unaware that her agreement had more than one meaning for him.

Alistair tugged at the hood of his cloak to free it from underneath the blanket and put it on. This was a much more effective method for hiding than his hand, after all. Okay, deep breaths. He had survived the Deep Roads and all the darkspawn there, he could do this. Alas, this plan was flawed because his next lungful of air also included the smell of woodsmoke and soap. He stole a glance at her from beneath his hood – the culprit of it all. She bunched her long, messy hair together with the one free hand at her side, strand after strand. Maker, since when could hair smell nice?

Struggling to put her hood up with her fistful of hair, Lenya shrugged the blanket off to free her other hand.

“Shit. Fuck. Cooooold!” He chuckled to himself as she swore and hurried to hide back under the blanket. Not before Revas had shifted sides and shoved his massive body in between them both, of course. Only his head poked out from underneath and he looked at Alistair with doggy glee. Well his jealousy served him well, to be honest. The distance created between them through the dog helped him to calm the stampeding horde of brontos in his stomach down to mere butterflies. The smell of damp dog fur wasn’t romantic, after all. “What is so funny?”

“Oh nothing… Just wondering if you also would share a blanket with Oghren for warmth, is all.”

“He can die in a ditch, for all I care,” she scoffed, but her sharp tone immediately mellowed. “You are my fellow Warden however, so it is okay. Besides, as you said, can’t have you turn into an ice-figure overnight.”
“Right, got to keep me alive in order to feed me to the archdemon to distract it long enough to kill it, huh?”

“Oh, *that* depends on the rate of bad jokes you make until then, really.”

His mouth twitched. “Oh? Perhaps we can turn them into a weapon against it? Given its size, we will need every advantage we can get, really.” Lenya fell silent, staring straight ahead into the flames again. Her hood hid her face and expression, but her posture was tense. Well, his joke backfired as they usually did with her, nothing new. Worse even, it reminded them both what they had to do. A shiver ran down his spine and neither cold nor infatuation was its reason. Coming face to face with the archdemon in the Deep Roads wasn’t something he would forget quickly, if ever. How should they beat – No, small steps and one after another, or else he might as well fling himself off this mountain in despair. To not be alone in this… helped, of course. Hopefully it was even half as much as a solace to her as it was to him.

Revas burrowed his head into Alistair’s lap and sighed sleepily. The mabari’s body, wedged between them, was providing him with warmth, like a canine furnace of a stinky sort. Together with the flames of the campfire and the thick blanket trapping their combined body heat within, the wind howling around them was barely palpable.

Lenya tried to suppress a yawn, though failed halfway through. “It is nice.” And it was, indeed. Comfortable in its simplicity, an easy companionship. Well, not *as* easy anymore given the flutter in his chest that did not abate, never did when she was close. “You know, if somebody would have told me half a year ago I would be sitting in front of Orzammar’s gates, side by side with a human, of all people...”

“How about side by side with a friend?” he blurted, once more unable to stop his mouth from escaping from him.

She turned her hooded head toward him, huffing out a laugh. For one agonizing moment it seemed she was ridiculing him for this notion. “Yeah, why the fuck not? We have been through much shit together lately and Ferelden is full of assholes, so I really could use a friend.” At that Revas, heaved his head and let out a protesting boof. “Aside of you, da’fen.” She scratched his ear and the mabari calmed down. Unlike Alistair, whose heart thrummed hard against his rib cage and as wide as the grin was, it would split his face apart any moment now. He couldn’t help it, though. Friends! Them! After how they started and considering how difficult it was to earn Lenya’s trust, this was more than he’d imagined to achieve. *More…* – yeah, this was part of the problem. But this here *was* nice and enough, had to be. He’d never push her to more than she was willing to give. After all, he wanted to make her life easier, not harder.

“Under one condition, puppy: Stop calling me Len,” she continued. “Since it means ‘child’ in my tongue and I don’t appreciate being called one. Obviously.”

Alistair looked up at her, his inhale sharp. “Oh Maker, I’m sorry, Len...-ya. I did not know this.”

“Obviously…” Lenya repeated, inclining her head to hide her amusement beneath the hood.

“So, will you stop calling me puppy then? In return?”

“Obviously… *not.*” Such a cruel, cruel woman. “Though I could stand to use your name more often, I guess. You earned it.” Lenya paused and her eyes twinkled as she sought his gaze. “Alistair.”

The heat ever-lingering within his stomach rushed upwards, through his chest, until it reached his
face. Which he promptly hid in his hand. Hopefully he had been quick enough and she hadn’t noticed anything. His exhale came out as an erratic shudder. “I like it, when you say it…”

“Oh?” Shit. Did he say that out loud? Of course she’d hear that then with these extended hearing of hers, no matter how whispered the words were. Why oh why did he have to fall for a woman that could tell if a pebble dropped in the Deep Roads from here? Part of her charm, yeah, but still. “It is just your name, why is this a big deal?”

Deep breaths. This was going to be a thing with her, huh? Needing to calm down. Thus, he counted to ten before daring to reply. “Not many people bother to learn it, to be honest.” That wasn’t even a lie, regarding his past and background. “I was either the commoner to be ignored or the royal bastard to be sneered at. Never, you know, just Alistair.”

“You were between it all, huh?” Her scoff was soft, pondering. “I know a thing or two about that myself. Even in my clan I only had a few people who – ” She stopped and the air hissed past her teeth as if hit with something heavy or painful. “Never mind. It’s not important.”

She didn’t want to talk about it, so Alistair didn’t press the topic. No matter how much he was dying to know more; of her and her past. “I respect your wish.” He cleared his throat. “About your name, I mean. I won’t call you Len anymore, then.”

Lenya gave him a brisk nod. ”Thank you. Always hated when people abbreviated my name like that, to be honest.”

“Noted.” Not a big deal, although it would take some time to get rid of this new habit. Unless… – A grin formed around his lips. “Can I call you Nel instead?”


Oh no, he broke her. “Well you see… Nel is Len backwards. Which gets rid of this unfortunate connotation in your mother tongue, but –“

“No.”

“You don’t like Nel?”

“Ugh…” Shaking her head, she slapped and grasped it with her hand, only to continue the motion. It sent her hood flying off. She barely noticed it. Then, she stopped, holding completely still.

This idea had greatly backfired, it seemed. “Nel? …Lenya?”

“Creators. Only you could come up with –“ The rest of her words were swallowed by the laughter rippling through and bursting out of her.

Alistair laughed along with her, solely out of lack of other options. “Sooo…” he asked, once she had calmed down again. “… is this good?”

“It is stupid, but it is so typical of you, puppy. I – ugh, fine. But use it rarely.”

He mock-saluted her. “Aye, aye, oh fearsome leader and friend.”

Sighing, she gave him a side-eye and put her hood back on. “I’m going to regret all of this, won’t I?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Nel.” Okay, time to halt with the teasing or he would land face first
in the flames soon. “Anyway, have you given it any thought about where to go next?”

“No.”

Ah. “Well, with the treaty secured from the dwarves we still have –“

“We won’t find my people in winter, forget it. Even if we manage to make our way through the Brecillian Forest, it is unlikely there will be a clan capable of aiding us, or any will be there at all at this time of the year.”

“Right. You are the expert here, of course. Can I still ask why?”

She sighed in the way she always did when something was challenging her patience. “As you can imagine, human, my people are hard pressed to score enough game to feed all mouths and are more vulnerable during these freezing temperatures. Hence why we take greatest care to not be found by outsiders in delving deeper into the Forest.”

“Wouldn’t you know where and how to find them nonetheless?”

“In theory, yes, but we are not a hivemind, Alistair,” she said, rolling her eyes. Touchy topic?

“Every clan is different, has different customs and views. Among other things, it depends on where my people settle and live… for a time. Clan life is very different in the desert than it is in the forest. Obviously. But I know of and grew up in the Brecillian Forest only, so believe me when I say you don’t want to stumble about in this place during winter.”

“I read stories of how the Brecillian Forest is dangerous, back in the monastery.” Alistair chuckled. “Thought it to be Chantry propaganda, like your people kidnapping children to sacrifice them to your – and I quote – ‘heathen gods.’”

“No.” She shook her head and luckily didn't take offense at the last bit. “The part about the forest is actually true. Due to the thin veil, there are a lot creatures that will try to kill you, or lure you in to eat you alive.” How charming. Why would anyone ever choose to live there then? “Not to mention,” she continued, halting his thoughts. “… it is a vast region. So excuse me if I am not keen on another wild halla chase while freezing our asses off. We have much better chance to find a sister clan of mine during spring, is what I’m saying.”

“I see. Thanks for explaining that. Sooo, um, mage tower it is, then?” Redcliffe was also close by – sort of – however, this was a can of worms he was unwilling to touch at the moment. Least of all, to open.

“Not sure, is it far from here?”

The wood sizzled and popped, as the flames slowly turned it to ash. He would have to add new fuel soon to keep the fire burning high and bright through the night. It also meant having to leave this shared cocoon of warmth in order to do so. Not exactly a favorite thought. “Lake Calenhad is a week’s march away, give or take,” Alistair replied, belatedly. “We can map out the route tomorrow, if you like. Hard to miss, either way. You will see.”

“Hmpf,” Lenya only made, freeing one hand to support her head with it and leaned her body more against the wall behind her.

“Nel… do you want to lie down?” he asked quietly, didn’t want to startle her. Alistair smiled at the other drowsy grunt that followed his question, because it was so damn adorable, so very her. “I have to get up to put wood into the fire anyway, so you might as well do so.”
Saying that was one thing, doing it a whole other. How could he when he was so comfortable and Lenya nearly sleeping? Revas glanced up to him and whined, as if judging him for either. “Yeah, I know. I’m going. Stay with her?” The mabari gave him an agreeing boof and changed place from the middle next to his mistress’ side. Alistair slowly peeled himself out of the blanket and wrapped his part of it around Lenya, which she understood as prompt to lie down. Holding onto the edges of the blanket, she continued to shift in place until she found a comfortable enough sleeping position for herself.

Right, that was his cue to look away, and he really, really should. Clearing his throat softly, he turned away in order to stoke the fire to new life. The flames snaked hungrily around the thick logs added, its warmth upon his face comforting like the touch of a hand. Alistair inhaled the crisp air, tinged with woodsmoke, deeply. Lenya’s presence behind him burned in his back as the heat of the fire did in front of him. Lingering in the peaceful silence a while longer, he eventually turned back around to her now asleep form. Wrapped in the blanket, she lay curled in a ball close to Revas providing warmth. The ease with which she again fell asleep next to himself spoke of the trust earned over time by him and – his breath hitched. Something in his chest squeezed together; a pain that was… sweet. That was love, huh? How odd and indistinguishable a feeling. No wonder he mistook it for something else the longest time. It was so very unlike all the stories told in books or person … way more personal and unique. Confusing, too.

It was more than just that, however. It was the need to keep her safe, despite her own capabilities to do so. To ease her burdens and putting another person before himself. In this case: Letting her keep the blanket she had claimed for herself alone, cold notwithstanding. In others, to shield her blows in battle, and lighten her days with humor, no matter how bad his own was. Her presence helped, in ways he’d never thought possible. And so it was only fair he’d return the favor, as fellow Warden, as friend. Nothing more or beyond that. The awareness of these feelings did not change the fact that there was a Blight to deal with. Many lives, also their own, depended on them and their success in this monumental task. Hunkering down close to the fire, Alistair sighed into the night, needed to set the frustration blooming inside free. Unfortunately, dawn was still a long time away from breaking.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading my chapter update! Let me know what you think and like in the comments, maybe? It would make my day. Kudos are also always welcome of course.

Change Notes: This is a complete reimagining of my post deep road arc and yay for snowball fight? A bit self-indulgence maybe, but obviously also serves to strengthen the bond between both Wardens. The POV is deliberately chosen with Alistair as well to show his growing feelings for Lenya, of course.

Next time: The journey to the mage tower. lots of feels, and Zevran... do i need to say more? :D
Hounds To Hamartia

Chapter Summary

With the treaty secured, it is time to finally leave Orzammar to gather more aid elsewhere. But unwanted surprises await the Wardens and their companions on the road to the Circle Of Magi...

Chapter Notes

New Ao3 name, same never-ending story hehe. Thank you all for your support so far. I know the interest in da is at an all time low right now, due to basically nothing new having happened for years now. So I appreciate any interaction with my fic all the more <3 Enjoy?

hamartia [hā"mär-tēə]
n. Tragic flaw.
n. The tragic flaw of the protagonist in a literary tragedy.
n. sin

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Double cross for a symbol
Name your rosary beads
You will nurture the fable till it bleeds
Bleeds for your love

-- Poets Of The Fall, Hounds To Hamartia

Tapster’s tavern was bursting at the seam with people everywhere. That in itself wasn’t anything new, yet tonight one couldn’t move without stepping on a person’s feet. The upbeat music of the band hidden within a sea of people mixed with the chatter and laughter to a nigh incomprehensible but festive din. Sweat ran nearly in the same amount like the ale did as people danced to its tune, their relief palpable. And among them all, Leliana sat at one of the tables that were worth more than any gold tonight.

“Really happy you had the foresight to reserve these for us,” Dagna shouted despite sitting next to her, then grimaced. “I hope we will be able to get through them to leave tomorrow. Given how filled the streets are with people way beyond the tavern, this will be difficult enough.”

Her head flung around to stare at the young dwarf. “We? You are leaving with us?… So you talked to Lenya?”

“Nooot exactly. I mean I asked one of the Wardens, but it wasn’t her. She is… a bit scary, you know?”
Ah, Alistair, then. It didn’t come up in their discussion earlier, before their meeting with now-king Bhelen. Though in between the gruesome tales of massive darkspawn hordes in thrall of the archdemon marching for the surface, Nithius’ tragic death while fighting the Broodmother and meeting Branka, there was little room to discuss Dagna trailing along with them toward the Circle of Magi.

“And I’m not sure he heard me correctly. Seems a bit distracted, that human.”

“Long live King Bhelen!” a dwarf with a thick brand shouted and raised his tankard to a toast. The others around echoed his words and actions, as did Leliana. At least for tonight every kind of dwarf was welcome here, no matter their caste – or lack thereof. It remained to be seen if King Bhelen would be able to heal the divide between them, once the festivities were over.

“He has a lot on his mind, with the Blight and all,” Leliana replied belatedly and took a sip from her ale to hide her amusement. The last few months hadn’t just changed her view on Orzammar, which had become a home to her in spite all the strangeness and stone overhead. After all, people were people, no matter the differences of customs or world view between them. She’d learned a lot in her time here, but so had the group that ventured into the Deep Roads. It… changed them, in ways she couldn’t put her finger on… yet.

“The enemy still lives, yet people celebrate?!” Almost melting with the wall as still as Sten stood behind her, his sudden remark startled her a bit. “This is a waste of time! We have achieved nothing.”

And yet he was here, instead to pass on the festivities like Morrigan and Shale did. “We have ended a long stalemate, crowned a king and gained the support of the dwarven army. That is far from achieving nothing, Sten.”

“You?” he huffed, glaring down at her. “You haven’t done any of these things, woman!”

“Wow, ruuuude,” Dagna pouted up at him and crossed her arms defiantly. “I’ll let you know that Leliana helped me to clear my mother’s name and bridged the way for the Wardens to be able to strike a deal with Bhelen upon their return! Leliana is very smart, and apt in politics.”

“Fascinating. I’m sure the archdemon will be very impressed.”

“One step at a time, Sten,” she replied, her tone harsher than intended. Without meaning to, the qunari had struck a nerve. She had been left behind for months, as back-up to let other Wardens in Orlais know, in case their venture into the Deep Roads failed. An important task, sure, but she was still left behind as the only one in their group. That stung, still did. Leliana exhaled, counted to ten to calm her voice, before continuing. “I don’t think your people win wars with rushing into them, no?”

“Tch.” His displeased noise was all he deigned suitable as a reply and Leliana left it at that, as well. No need to fight over sentiments, especially not now. Tomorrow they would be back on the road, as one group against the Blight, and that was what counted in the end. His height didn’t make him easy to ignore, though she turned her attention back toward Dagna.

“Well, I’m glad to have you alongside us, however temporarily. But I hope you have informed your parents of your departure, at least.”

“There had been a discussion, yeeees.” Dagna nursed the drink in front of her. “Mother wants me to see the world beyond Orzammar, after what happened. Life is short, she told me.” Sighing, she hesitated to continue. “My father was… not as receptive or understanding, I fear. Either way, after
years of waiting, my studies are now in reach. I cannot back down now because of my father’s disagreement. It is too important!”

Farkas was a taciturn man, yet one with a big heart underneath the gruff exterior. He’d taken Leliana in, shared hearth and home, when she was forced out of Harrowmont’s estate after his assassination. Aiding them in using her shrewdness and abilities of her former life had been the least she could have done to repay his hospitality and free Olissa. It had been close, a nigh checkmate on the political playing board, but it worked out in the end. Blackmailing the right people always did. Nothing she was proud of, but a necessary evil, in this case. “He will come around, given enough time. As guard at Orzammar’s gates, he should be aware that the world reaches far beyond the Frostback mountains.”

“I hope you are right. Maybe with Bhelen opening up the strict laws, I will be able to visit them from time to time, then.”

That would be the ideal compromise. Better than having to leave your home forever, like she had to do… twice. The music broke up, scattering her thoughts like the crowd did, suddenly in a rush. Which was due to a certain bulky man at least twice their height, who attempted his way through them. The dwarves clamped around him as soon Alistair had passed them, like a wave crashing down. Many patted his back, congratulated him on a job well done. It would be so easy for a disgruntled Harrowmont supporter to put a hidden blade between his ribs – no, best not to think about that. After all he’d been through in the Deep Roads, Alistair deserved to be carefree, at least for a single night. Considering his staggering steps and face heated either by alcohol or exertion, he shared that thought.

“Heeeey, Leliana,” he said, grin widening as he reached the table. Stopping a step too late, he bumped into it. “Whoops.” Nearly missing the chair as he sat down, he plunked his tankard down hard on the table. “Why you are sitting here all alone? Come dance, drink with us, over there.”

“Is this what you have been doing the past hours, huh?”

“Nooppe. No dancing here.” He shook his head sluggishly. “Would be bad for anyone’s feet, ‘specially Nel’s. I like watching her doing that, however! She is – ”

“Nel?”

“Sorry… my Lenya-approved nickname for her.” His expression brightened further, like a boy giving away a secret. “I keep forgetting that people don’t know that.”

Dagna gasped out and clasped her hands. “Aww, Warden, you are adorable, you know that? All blushing and in awe of your lady. So romantic.”

“As you can see, I’m far from being alone, Alistair,” Leliana said, giggling at his shocked stare. Dagna’s earnest amazement never had failed to catch the recipient off-guard so far. “Besides, I had spent more than enough nights here, drinking and dancing and singing. So it is nice to simply sit back and watch others doing that, for a change.”

“I… umm.” Tongue-tied, he diverted his attention to his drink to loosen it up again. Having emptied his mug after a few gulps, he shook himself. “Never can get used to the taste of the ale here.”

“There is no need to be embarrassed, you know? I watched both of you today and things obviously have changed between you. Compared to the months prior to the Deep Roads, I mean.”
“A bit creepy, that,” he quipped and drove a hand through his sweaty face with a sigh. “Fine. You are right. We are friends now.”

“Just… friends?” The problem about Dagna’s lack of filter in her speech was that she had no sense for when it was better to stop. “I thought —”

“Yeah, no.” His laugh was akin to a scoff. Flutes intoned the next song of the band, their break now over. “No time for that. There is a Blight going on, after all.”

“That duty doesn’t mean you have to stop having feelings, Alistair. It is part of being human.”

“Which is also part of the problem, isn’t it?” His groan was loud enough to be heard over the music, however momentarily. "Look, what do you want to hear, Leliana? That you have been right all along? You were. It is more than a crush, I’m in love —”

“Hey, Lenya, it was, right?” Dagna called out for the Dalish approaching their table, and waved at her. “Good to finally meet you!”

Alistair sputtered, nearly fell from his chair in shock. “— with this song! Yeah, isn’t it great?” Taking pity with him, Leliana pushed her mug toward him. He mouthed a ‘thank you’ and took it to drink, all while Lenya stood behind him, waiting to be addressed.

“Wow, awkward,” Dagna blurted, earning herself a gentle jab of Leliana’s elbow below the table.

“Hey.” The Dalish gave them a halfhearted greeting in return, and swayed on her feet. “Puuuuuuppy...” she whined, sounding several years younger her age.

“Right… sorry.” Alistair put the mug down and hesitantly turned around to face her. “What is it, Nel?”

“I wooooon!” she declared brightly.

“You… won?” he asked, frowning. “In what exactly?”

“Drinking. Oghren lost, heh. This Warden ssstamina thing iss awesooome.” Pausing, she slanted her head to the side. “Meh, that song isn’t that good. Dunno why you like it so much.”

“Yes, well –“ Alistair coughed into his hand.

“He is very enthusiastic about music, you see,” Leliana chipped in, grinning. “But only about a particular kind.” Dagna did her best to stifle her laughter to a snickering, while Alistair didn’t hide his glare at all. Ah well, this had been worth it.

“Oof, when had everythiiings sstarted turning so faaast?” Ignoring Leliana’s teasing comment, Lenya stumbled forward and landed like a hapless maiden in his arms, almost as if on purpose. And while she was shrewd in battle and outside of it, she was not in matters of the heart. Or else she’d have seen through his tenuous lie right away. Maker, alone the way Alistair looked at her right now, was making his feelings so painfully obvious. “Guess I’m druunk,” she giggled. “Whoops.”

“Just friends, huh,” Dagna whispered as the two Wardens continued to lock eyes and the tension between them mounted. She gave the dwarf a helpless shrug. At this point, who could even say? Not her, for sure. It wasn’t as if she were with them the past three months.

“Boop.” Lenya broke the tension between them with poking the tip of Alistair’s nose and burst into
“Okay…” Harrumphing, Alistair put her giggling self upright and stabilized her swaying with one hand at her shoulder. “I’m not the most sober person myself right now, Nel, but yooou… you must be mad to challenge Oghren, of all people, to a drinking game.”

“Pshaa, he was far ahead of meeee already, puppy. This was how I knew I would wi –“ Her hiccup devolved into a burp she stifled with a hand. “Not feeling well sssuddenly.”

“Right… let’s get you out of here, then.” He stood up and his own tipsy unstable gait in spite already had an arm around her shoulder and gently steered her toward the entrance. Stopping once more, Alistair turned around to Dagna and herself. “Not a word to her,” he mouthed, the words clear despite being swallowed by the music. “Please.”

“What?” Leliana replied, deliberately loud, and snorted. “Your taste in music is safe with me. Bard’s honor!” His eyes flinted, which only added to her amusement. He was way too easy to tease. “Good night, Alistair. See you tomorrow.”

At Orzammar’s gates, Leliana stopped and raised her head toward the sky, eyes closed. She’d been outside, from time to time, when Farkas’ shift allowed her to trail along. Now it was different, and bittersweet, in a way. Since it was goodbye to a place she called home, once more.

“Ugh, took us long enough to get to this point again,” Lenya said and Revas barked in agreement. “Good riddance to all the stone overhead.”

“For now, yeah,” Alistair agreed. “We will have to return in a bit to fetch the supplies King Bhelen is commissioning for us. For now we have to make due with what we have, till we reach the tower.”

“Amusing how you are keen to switch one stone prison for the other, tis not?”

“Not keen, no,” Of course he would rise to the bait of Morrigan’s derision. “Though somehow I have the inkling the mages won’t come to us to honor the Warden treaty. Seeing as they live in a big, high tower across Calenhad’s Lake a week’s march away from here.”

“Entombed in it, more like;” the witch sneered in return. “Mother taught me everything there is to know about the cattle you call mages in the Circle. Tis a waste of time to seek their aid. For none is to find there.”

“Alas, she forgot to teach you how not everybody cares what you have to say, Morrigan!”

Turning away, Leliana tuned out their bickering and inhaled deeply. The air was crisp, smelled of snow and burned in her lungs with its frigidity. Her eyes moved behind closed eyelids, slowly adjusting to the morning twilight that was more bearable than the full harshness of day after months underground.

“Whoa, that sky… is big. I read all about it, of course…” Dagna stopped and made a noise that was close to throwing up. “I… may need a moment.” She ran away and then retched the content of her stomach into the grass… or snow.

Leliana gasped, forced her eyes open in order to be able to aid her friend. All around her was white, the snow blinding even in the murky morning light. No matter, she rushed after the dwarf and
patted her back. “It will get better with time. For now, focus on your feet, while you walk and don’t look up, okay? Can you do that?”

The dwarf coughed and weakly nodded. “My studies are worth it, my studies are worth it,” she repeated under her breath like a mantra and willed her feet to move forward.

“Let me carry your... things.” Leliana stopped with a frown as Dagna shrugged off her backpack. She hadn’t brought much, especially for a week’s journey. “Is this everything?”

She in-and-exhaled several times before trusting her voice enough. “I figured the circle will have every necessity, and more. Light travel is preferable to carrying too much when walking, right? Or so my books told –“

“Why is she here?” Lenya cut into Dagna’s words, appearing in Leliana’s peripheral vision, seemingly out of nowhere. “I do not remember agreeing to your friend trailing along, shem.”

**Perhaps because you were drunk, at the time.** Raising her head, she met the Dalish’s sharp gaze with her own. Alas, nothing had changed between them in these months. Lenya’s hostility toward herself was still ever-present and –

“Well, I did, Nel,” Alistair spoke up and moved back, to stand beside her. “Dagna, it was, right?” The dwarf gave him a nod. “She asked me if she can accompany us to the tower. And since we are going there anyway, I figured –“

“What?” Her voice went shrill and shook as her ire re-focused on her fellow Warden. “Are you out of your mind, puppy? Have you already forgotten how it ended the last time we allowed a non-combatant into our group?”

“No.” Pain lingered in the single word uttered. “Of course not. But it isn’t the same, Lenya. We are not in the Deep Roads. That won’t happen this time.”

“Sure, and the archdemon will drop dead in an instant too, just because you said so...”

“Hah, unlikely.” He bowed his head a little more in order to catch Lenya’s gaze and his lips quirked into a lopsided smile. “But wouldn’t it be great if it did? Let me try...” As though readying himself for battle, he shifted his stance to a wider one. Then he waved his gauntleted hands about in a grotesque, overdramatic pretend-version of magic use. “Archdeeemoooong, I command thy: Drrroooooooood deeeeeeaaaad!”

“Ugh, stop!” The Dalish huffed out the bit of air held within, and with it all her prior tension seemed to be gone as well. She glared at her fellow Warden, before rolling her eyes. “Fiiiine. She is your charge though, when darkspawn or whatever wants to kill us on our way to the tower that day, understood?” Wow, he’d become extremely efficient in diffusing her bad temper. Fascinating.

“Alistair mock-saluted her, his grin widening. “Aye, aye, o fearsome leader.” Then, he turned around to Dagna. “Don’t worry. We will get you to the tower, in one piece and alive, even. Warden promise.”

“I, um, thanks, but I can handle myself,” she replied. “I made a lot of explosive potions to throw at bad guys, if needed.” And she had offered to carry said bag for her? That suddenly seemed like a bad, bad idea.

“We are losing daylight,” Sten stated, face and voice stoic as ever. “If you insist on continue talking, do so while moving!”
“Finally something I can agree –“ The last of Lenya’s words got swallowed by the deafening sound of the heavy metal gates groaning as they started to open up once more.

“Hey, Wardens, waaaait! Ya gonna leave without good, old Oghren?” It was their Deep Roads guide who pushed himself through still barely ajar doors. Some of his armor pieces were only half-fastened and hung loosely around his large belly and shoulders.

“That was the plan, yes.” Lenya threw a withering look over her shoulder. “Alas, we got delayed.”

“And thank the stone for that!” He hurried down the steps, while the guards behind them gave the signal to shut the gates again. “Ain’t ya all leaving to kill darkspawn without me.”

“Ugh, whatever. Tag along too, for all I care. At least you can fight, and it is one more body between me and these assholes.”

“Hah, that is the spirit, Missy. Ya won’t regret it.”

Lenya’s boot crunched in the hardened snow as she whirled away and fastened her steps. “Already too late for that.”

“I’m cooooold!”

The words weren’t more than a whisper in the dark, though also repeated over and over by that miserable bastard Azar the past hours. Loud enough a whine to grate on Zevran’s thinning patience, either way. Lying in wait in the snow – because Ferelden was too bloody freezing for its own good – for the two Wardens to arrive wasn’t his favorite past time either. A job was a job, however, and this contract an especially well paid one. And at least this one did not require him to spend three days in a stuffy wardrobe to wait for his mark during Antivan’s summer. Silver-linings, no?

“Are you sure the Wardens will even take this route?” Azar asked, his teeth chattering as he suppressed another whine. The man beside him had rugged good looks – a sharp jaw, thick black locks and broad shoulders. Marvelous to look at, really. His fault lay more in whenever he opened his mouth. Brasca, if it weren’t for his aptitude with poison, Zevran would have thrown him down into the valley days ago, head first.

“The snow storm two days ago, my dear whiny friend, made other roads impassable.” He suppressed the wish to roll his eyes. “And there is also the little detail of Fiore having scouted ahead and seen them, I might add.”

This place was perfect for an ambush; narrow to pass through with only one entrance and exit. So as soon the Wardens were halfway into the valley, they would be trapped within. The blasted abundance of snow would be useful for once and serve as a natural hindrance. It should slow them down enough in order for the archers on the side to pick their companions out with their arrows, one by one. If that failed, well, he lay in wait on this position for a reason. Perched up on a cliff, Zevran had a complete overview of the valley’s entrance. The cover of darkness was yet another factor against them in his favor. Elven archers were a bit… cliché, yes, though in this case a crucial part of his rather unsophisticated plan. It would work – and even if not, he would reach his intended goal either way with it. No loss, only gain, that was how he liked it.

“I see...” Azar fidgeted in place, and sniffed. “And when will that be, exactly?” How did he even pass the Crow’s selection? They were close in age and he as such an experienced assassin, well,
not like himself, as he was rather unique and gifted, thank you very much. Still, one would think their one-of-a-kind training methods had beaten his low tolerance for just about everything out of him. Quite literally, in fact.

“Patience, my friend. It will be only a little while now. As such your silence is required and appreciated.”

This was why he preferred to work alone, had taken up this contract on his own, yet his superiors didn’t leave at that. They had to meddle in his perfectly good plan of throwing himse– A blast shattered the silence of night, then another, close. What was – And another, too close now, as his ears rung with its impact. Fire seared along both sides of the valley and rose to a giant wall that burned everything in its wake. They had a mage, a remarkably capable one, at that. Of course this had been the one thing he forgot to factor in. A detail that not only incapacitated their archers, but also robbed them of element of stealth under the cover of night. With as little actions as that, the ambushed had become the ambusher, turned the tide.

Best to get down there, before – an arrow zoomed past his vision, burying itself in Azar’s left shoulder. Before that, yes! “Down,” he screamed, too late. For a second one hit Azar’s throat, prematurely ending his struggle. At least he would be quiet now, eternally so.

To avoid a similar fate – hah, the irony of that – Zevran scrambled to get off the cliff and down to battle. Let his end be a more graceful one than the burned archers or the bloody pincushion named Azar. He owed it to her, the reason he was here, the place of no return.

His hands sought for purchase on slippery, cold stone on his way down. Zevran turned his head to survey incoming danger, and met a pair of elven eyes past the bowstring in the distance. They glinted in the firelight like the griffon did upon her armor, almost as if she saw him. No, she actually did. He wouldn’t make it and the searing pain within his hand was the final confirmation for it. He couldn’t hold on any longer, and fell. Odd how his last thought was one of regret, as darkness consumed his consciousness.

“Wait, do not kill him!”

The voice was lilting and pierced through the fog of his consciousness with its urgency. Hmm, what? Was this – no there were definitely no beauties or strapping men feeding him grapes, so this was not the afterlife. Being dead would also hurt less – not that he had any long-lasting experiences with that state, mind. But – what little air reached his lungs was forced out of them, when he was harshly thrown down on his back. A boot was planted on his chest, added more and more pressure. A quite exciting aspect under other circumstances, but not now. Zevran gasped and the air rattled in his throat. Ah, the joy of several broken or cracked rips. At least that was a familiar sensation.

“Why not, shem? He tried to kill us!” This other woman was angry and impatient, as one would rightly be after an assassination attempt on one’s own life. And yes, the press of steel at his throat definitely added to that impression.

“See that symbol emblazoned on his armor?” The pressure of the boot lessened as she raised her feet to check his chest. “They are an order of assassins out of Antiva, called the Crows. Very powerful, and renowned for always getting the job done... so to speak. Someone went to great expense to hire this man, Lenya.”

“Ah, your companion is most certainly correct.” Ow, talking would be a problem. Zevran blinked,
forced his eyes open. It was still dark, still night, still… *her*. That elf he saw, right before his graceless fall down the cliff. The arrow piercing his palm didn’t help matters, of course. It had been since removed and rudimentary bandaged. “It’s you,” he wheezed, staring up at her. His ensuing cough altered more and more into painful laughter breaking free. Of course. One of the Wardens was an elf, with heightened sight in the darkness like himself. Why had he assumed for both to be human the whole time? This had been another fatal flaw in his plan. How effortlessly she ripped it to shreds with only three arrows and fire from the mage’s hands.

Pathetic on his part, though –objectively seen– intriguing in potential. So better to continue talking, as hard as it currently was. “A rather taciturn fellow in the capital hired me. Loghain, I think his name was?” Zevran didn’t miss the look she shared with the human man keeping to the shadowed background. “Yes, that was it.”

The Warden uncorked a vial and forced it down his throat. It was too sweet to be poison – ah, elfroot, magically enhanced. Rolling to the side, he coughed up a bit of blood stuck in his throat ever since. “Go on.” He inhaled sharply and the pain was lessened at the intake, yet far from gone. Zevran fell into another coughing fit, still struggling for air. Bending down once more, she uncorked another vial and repeated the process. Ah, her care for his well-being was quite heartwarming.

“I’d appreciate if you would stop wasting our potions on our enemies, Lenya,” said another woman hidden in the shadows, scoffing as she gestured. “Tis winter, in case you have forgotten. Ingredients for them are momentarily hard to come by.”

“I’m aware, Morrigan. Thanks. But we need him able to speak…” Finally! Someone making sense in this bloody cold country.

“For what? To confirm he tried to kill us all?” The other woman threw up her hands. “Such a waste of time. Indulge in it without me.” Steps crunching in burned grass indicated she walked away. Such pity, he had just come to appreciate her company.

“And speak I will, my dear Warden,” he said, free of pain at last. The second potion had hit the spot. Or rather *several* ones and mended them. “The crows did not pay me for silence. In fact, *I* wasn’t paid anything. The Crows, however, were paid quite handsomely for this contract. Or so I understand.” With her blade still at his throat and her boot pressing down upon his chest, there was no other option than to remain lying on the ground. To be at the mercy of such a capable woman wasn’t the worst situation to be in, honestly. ”Which does make me about as poor as a chantry mouse, come to think of it. Being an Antivan Crow isn’t for the ambitious, to be perfectly honest.”

“I don’t care about that, *seth’lin*. Tell me more about this *shem’alas* who hired you.”

Not much of her face was visible from his position. Very strong thighs, though. Also she kept slipping into a foreign tongue, that wasn’t all *that* foreign once he could place it. “You are Dalish, no? Lenya was the name?”

“Answer. My. Question.” Each of her words were accentuated with added pressure of her boot. Kinky, that. “Are you loyal to this asshole?”

The tip of her blade bore into his throat further, drew a bit of blood. Mhm, better not to further test her patience, then. “That… Loghain? I have no idea what his issues are with you. The usual, I imagine. You threaten his power, yes? Beyond that, no, I'm not loyal to him. I was merely contracted to perform a service.”

“Which you have failed in,” scoffed the man hidden in the shadows.
“Fortunately for us all, no?” Zevran slanted his head as far the Warden’s blade at his throat allowed it. But beyond the bulk of plate armor he wore, a better view on him kept him being denied. The man sounded… young, though. Perhaps the second Warden, then? Clearly not the one being in command here, considering who held him captive at blade-length. Interesting. “I begin to find myself lucky for failing, anyhow. Considering, I should be dead in this case – but I’m not. And I so prefer living, honestly.”

“That can change in a heartbeat, seth’lin.”

“Ooh, you're rather an aggressive little minx, aren't you? Lovely, too.”

“Stop that!” the human Warden snapped and pushed past the woman with the lilting voice, to halt at his fellow Warden’s side in a rather protective fashion. Ah. “Tell us everything about your contract with Loghain or face the consequences!”

“No need for something so drastic, my dear other Warden. I am more than willing to give you all the info you need. There is no reason why I would not?”

“You are taking your sweet time to get to the point, in this case.” Her accent was strong… Orlesian, perhaps? “One would think a blade at your throat would heighten your urgency to speak.”

“What can I say? That is not my first time ending up in this position, nor will it be the last. Hazard of my profession, I suppose.”

“Ah, so you fail at your assassinations a lot, then?” There was a smile in her voice, mischief, too. “From what I heard of the Crows, they are rather strict and intolerant about… failure.”

“And you would be correct.” Who was she, for knowing that? Her nonchalant, outright amused reaction toward him spoke of something more. Maybe even of experience in the same field. “I failed to kill the Wardens, to fulfill my contract, so now my life is forfeit. That's how it works. If you don't kill me, the Crows will.” He cocked his head, in order to address the Dalish Warden. “I am an eternal optimist, however. And as such I hope you will hear my proposal. It is a mutually beneficial agreement, if you will.”

“Why... would I want that?” Her tone was still as harsh and unforgiving as her blade and boot upon him. That she took time to ask this question instead to slit his throat outright showed her openness for this possibility, though. Good. He could work with that.

“Why indeed?” Zevran chuckled wryly. “As said, I like living and would marginally be more useful to you, alive. Besides, I think I’ve already paid my worth back to the Crows, plus tenfold. The only way out, however, is to sign up with someone they can't touch. Seeing how much you give the Crows pause makes you the ideal option for that, my dear Warden.” He paused for effect, took a deep breath. For the first time it did not hurt doing so. “So let me serve you instead.”

“What?” the other Warden interrupted before she even had a chance to speak. “No. No way. This is insane. You can’t seriously consider this, Nel!”

“Who said I do, puppy? Why would I?”

“Because I am skilled at many things, from fighting to stealth and picking locks.” She hadn’t asked him exactly, but he couldn’t pass the opportunity to make his case. “I know the Antivan Crows and how they operate. I could warn you should they attempt something more... sophisticated. After my attempt has failed, that is.”
There was a hitch in her exhale and her force put upon him lessened. Her shift in position, however small, gave way to her face. Keen green eyes stared down at him, observed every inkling within and stir of his face. There was no fooling her, so much had been clear ever since she fired these arrows – hmm, minutes... or hours ago? Ah, but he had her attention at last and that was what counted. “If that is still not enough, I could warm your bed, or simply stand about, looking pretty. I also know a great many jokes, twelve massage techniques and six different card games. Consider it something I’m throwing in for free.”

“How fascinating.” The anger seemed to have left her system, was replaced by bitter cynicism. Tragic for someone so young. “And what hinders you from attempting to murder us again? You must think I’m stupid!”

“I think you're royally tough to kill. And utterly gorgeous.” The tension in her body increased, indicating her dislike of his words. Better to adjust them, then. “Not that I think you'll respond to simple flattery, my dear Warden. So to answer your inquiry: Getting captured by a target seems a tad detrimental to one's budding assassin career. Hence, even if I did kill you now – or later – the Crows might kill me just on principle for failing the first time. They are quite the stickler to protocol in this regard.” He clicked his tongue. “Honestly, I'd rather take my chances with you. Assuming you allow me one; or another, for that matter.”

“Ugh.” Her breath vanished as cloud of puff into the night sky and with it her remaining tension. Relaxing her stance, she stepped away to sheathe her blade. “Get up, seth 'lin.”

“Thank you.” Zevran followed her command all too readily. “You won’t –”

“What?! You're taking the assassin with us now?”

“We have been picking up strays all day, Alistair. What a fucking difference makes one more, then?”

“It does because one of them is a talkative but harmless dwarven girl and the other, well, Oghren. Both of them are not a professional murderer for hire like him. Both of them have not tried to kill us only about an hour ago!”

It had been mere moments since joining their group and already were both Wardens fighting over him like jealous lover. How exciting. The bulky human she called Alistair wasn’t exactly supportiv –

“Hold still!” warned him the Orlesian woman, only to twist his arms behind his back in one fluent movement. She had done this before, and had such a strong grip, impressive. “Welcome... –”

“Zevran,” he said, smirking. “Zev, to my friends. Which I hope we will be, dear –“

“Leliana,” she stated and focused back on binding his hands with a cord. “Having an Antivan Crow join us sounds like a fine plan, in my opinion. However, not everyone in our group does or will feel the same, as you can already see.” She nodded toward the Wardens who were still busy bickering over him joining their team. “So apologies for this small security measure before taking you in our camp for the night.” Ah, that’s where the others disappeared to, then.

“Tsk, and here I thought you simply wanted to wrap me up to unpack me later, in private. How very disappointing.”

A chuckle escaped him when she did the last knot extra-tight. “Oooor...” she drawled, letting out a huff. “… it wasn’t such a good idea after all.”
The Wardens had fallen silent and a resigned human stood next to a glowering Dalish. Even without paying attention to their words, it was pretty obvious who had the upper hand in this dispute.

“I hope you know what you are doing,” the human’s words were released amidst a sigh and his armored hand raised to touch the small of her back – only to withdraw at the last second. Ah, *that* explained his aversion toward himself joining, and him being here in general. That and him trying to kill them –her, in particular– of course. “Is not that I don’t trust you, *I* do, but –”

She noticed Zevran’s gaze and met it with sharpness. “If you do lift as much as a finger against anyone in my group, I will slit you open from head to toe and feed your entrails to my dog.”

He’d forgone the quip about his bound hands in favor for a respectful incline of his head. “I’d expect nothing less of you, my dear Warden.”

She whirled away with a scoff, no longer regarding him. Odd, how he came here to die, just to be denied that wish at the last moment by her. This plan had to be delayed, then. He chuckled to himself. Well, there were worse things in life than serving the whims of a deadly sex goddess.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I am aware how that chapter ended, and no there won’t be a love triangle between Alistair, Lenya and Zevran. Because I fucking hate that trope and prefer my relationship lines rather very defined. Doesn’t mean that Zev won’t be an important person in Lenya’s life, mind you. Also if you look at the tags, you will notice that I added some particular ones ;)

**Change notes:** The shift to Zevran's pov during the attack is a huge one, for once.

Much more interesting that way, too, imo. I tried to take as little from the game as possible to not bore anyone... however i still stuck mainly to canon dialogue in the last bit, because a) it suited the scene and my needs well and b) I am still a bit shaky in Zevran’s voice, since it had been years where I last wrote him. But I am getting there again and it is fun to spend time in his head again. I really missed writing him. Another big change is how the festivities in Orzammar pan out, and the shift to Leliana's pov. I thought it was a good possibility to get more insight about her months there. Dagna is always a delight to write, of course, and i really like the friendship between the two.

*Thank you for reading my fic/chapter update, please let me know what you think about it in the comment box below. It would be very much appreciated <3*

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