**In good times and in bad**

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by **PookatheCat**

Summary

"My name is Alistair. I'm an almost-templar, a full-time Grey Warden and a royal bastard... but, shush, this is actually a secret. This is my story... although it's not alone about me... It's more like my version of how the most unlikely bunch of losers accidentally saves the world. And no, I'm not exaggerating. It's a tale worth being told and worth reading. It's pretty tragic, mind you, with lots of villains, treacherous bastards, dragons and more darkspawn than I can count. But also kinda funny... we laugh more than you would expect. And you're going to meet the most ravishing, beautiful and cunning young woman ever... my woman. Maker's Breath, she's amazing! And she's the reason why this story contains a whole lot of... lamppost licking... err... Now, why don't you just read it while I stand over there until the blushing stops, yes?"

Alistair's POV of the events during the Fifth Blight and his love for the Cousland Warden. The story follows the game with lots of extras.

Rated explicit for what happens after chapter 28. Before, oh, well, you know this is about adorably woo-less Alistair, so what else to expect?

Fan Art Collections Chapters 99 and 100.
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Includes quotes from the game Dragon Age Origins.

Follows the timeline of Dragon Age Origins, mostly tells the things that happen in between the adventures of the game.

There is fanart for this story. If you don't want to click through all the chapters to find it, Chapter 99 and 100 are art collections for the two amazing artists Notevensorry (100) and Erusel (99). You can also find the links to their tumblr accounts there where there's even more art they created.

Recommended reading: Weight of the World by Ashley Reid
"Duncan! You're back!"

"Obviously," the leader of the Grey Wardens of Ferelden replies but his eyes sparkle with amusement when he looks at me. Only six months ago I joined the order and already Duncan has become more of a father to me than I ever had. My real father never took much interest in me as if I didn't exist at all. The man who raised me sent me away when I was ten years old because his wife despised me. Maybe it's easy to impress me. Maybe it's just Duncan.

I am so glad to see him. Ever since he left Ostagar for his trip to Highever, the Grey Wardens have tried to measure up to the expectations Cailan seems to have when it comes to the legendary warriors against the darkspawn. He seems to believe we only have to glare at the darkspawn and they start running. We at least managed not to be exiled again. But Gregor set his beard on fire and I have been playing hide and seek with the Revered Mother. I swear she's the impersonation of the Maker's wrath and I have to pay dearly for my sins. I should have never mentioned that I almost became a templar. And I shouldn't have expressed my relief of having escaped this fate in front of her. My mistake. I just can't keep my mouth shut.

I keep pace with my mentor while he strides towards the Grey Warden's camp. Not that it is a big camp. There's only so few of us. Duncan looks tired like he hasn't slept well in weeks. With the Blight our nightmares have become worse. I have felt it and I am only a puppy compared to my brothers.

"I have brought a new recruit with me," Duncan informs me while he nods his greetings at other soldiers as we walk. "And I want you to take special care of Rori. She has suffered a great loss."

I only half listen to him. New recruits are a good thing for the Grey Wardens - if they survive the Joining. I'm not going to make the mistake of getting too fond of the new recruits again. Last time it was my Joining and the other poor sod didn't make it. He was a nice chap. And it was a shock to see him die. We didn't spend much time together - still, we were introduced to each other as recruits and I didn't have a clue about the dangers of the Joining. All Duncan gave me was some cryptic warnings that I couldn't make much sense of. I so hated being a templar I probably wouldn't have cared if he had told me the truth. Anyway, that other recruit, He was a brother in arms from the beginning. Now I know better, although I doubt this is any preparation for what is to come..

"Sure. Where can I find him... Wait! ... Have you just said she? Like in she's a girl?" I almost stumble over my own feet. Somehow I never thought Duncan could return with a girl in tow. Sure, there have been female Grey Wardens, but - well, it's a rough life. I love it. But a girl?

"Yes, Alistair, Rori is a young woman."
"Wow. A girl. I mean, we don't have any other girls yet. And now there she is. A female Grey Warden. That's somewhat unexpected. Why would she want to become a Grey Warden?"

Duncan comes to a halt so unexpectedly that I almost bump into him. "Do you have any problems with women, Alistair?" He arches an eyebrow quizzically at me.

I become flustered - that's something I am really good at. My special talent. "No, no, not at all. I like women. I love them. A lot. Uhm, I didn't mean this to sound like that. I'm not a drooling lecher or any other kind of deviant. I don't like them that way. No, not at all." The corners of Duncan's mouth begin to twitch while I go on digging my own grave again. My words spill out of my mouth so fast that my brain cannot keep up. "That hasn't come out right again, has it? Should I have another try or better not. What I want to say is that I like women a lot... just not the new recruit..."

Now Duncan is grinning with undisguised amusement. "Alistair..."

I sigh, frustrated with myself. "Let's pretend I didn't say anything at all."

Duncan thankfully isn't one to rub it in. "Rori is the most promising of the new recruits. I have high expectations in her and I have no doubt she will surpass them all. Just make sure she feels welcomed. Help her get settled in. At the moment she is taking a look around but I told her to seek you out once she is ready. Maybe you find her first."

"How could I recognize her?"

"In case you stumble across a young woman with unruly bright red hair and huge blue eyes, one with a sword and a dagger strapped to her back, that should be her."

"Heavily armed redhead. Yep, I should be able to find her." I turn to leave. Duncan needs some rest. I am almost gone when he calls me. "And Alistair..."

"Yeah?"

"She's pretty. Just don't get too excited about that."

Haha! Funny old man.

With a feeling of looming doom I start searching for the girl. And guess who I find? Or maybe she finds me. One never knows with that woman. The Revered Mother! She ambushes me when I less expect her. My mind is busy with getting used to the thought of a woman joining the Grey Wardens. A young and pretty woman. Blame me, but I wouldn't be bothered as much by an old and ugly one. But young and pretty brings the white knight inside of me to the surface.

"Brother Alistair!"

Ouch! I wince at the voice behind me. It is so loud and shrill there is no way pretending I didn't hear her. So I switch on a smile and turn while I wonder why she still has to call me brother when I have left the Chantry for good.

"Revered Mother, I didn't see you coming." Or I'd have run faster. Taken another route. Hidden behind that barrel over there. Sprouted wings and soared to the sky. Whatever would have saved me from having to talk to her. Don't get me wrong, I believe in the Maker. I'm not a religious person, however. Priests aren't that bad. There's a lot of very nice ladies in the Chantry. This Revered Mother isn't one of them. I can't stand her. And she knows. That's why she haunts me like a nightmare.
"Would someone like you still find the time to clear his depts with the Chantry that took him in and brought him up, trained him and gave him a shelter?"

Doom.

DOOM.

Where's the darkspawn when you need it?

I stiffl a groan and just in time remember that rolling my eyes won't do me no good.

"What is it you need my assistance for?" I ask through the gritted teeth of my fake smile. A moment later I have been downgraded to Revered Mother's errand boy. She needs a message to be delivered. She has five sisters in her company, following right behind her like a holy armada but she needs me to talk to the mages.

Yeah, make my day!

A busty little redhead with a pixie haircut, runs into the scene I have with the mage. He isn't pleased but, hey, he's not alone with this feeling. I am glad when I can get rid of him and turn to the young lady who approaches me once the mage has left, calling me a fool. He isn't the first today and won't be the last.

"You know one good thing about the Blight is how it brings people together."

"I know exactly what you mean," she laughs pleasantly.

"It's like a party. We could all stand in a circle and hold hands. That would give the darkspawn something to think about. Wait, we haven't met, have we? I don't suppose you happen to be another mage?"

She cocks her head to one side and grins at me with mischief sparkling in her dark blue eyes. "Would that make your day worse?"

She has some sense of humour and certainly is no mage. I cannot detect any sign of her taking offence of my question. "Hardly. I just like to know my chances of being turned into a toad any given moment."

"We wouldn't want that to happen," she agrees. "There's only so few Grey Wardens I've been told. Can't afford losing one to a mage's wrath."

It then dawns on me who she is. "Wait, I do know who you are. You are Duncan's new recruit from Highever. I should have recognized you right away. I apologize."

"Oh, that's all right. No offense taken."

"Good. You didn't exactly catch me at my finest with the mage there."

"Oh, I thought it was rather entertaining... err... at least from my point of view... probably not as much for you." She grins sheepishly, blushing slightly.

"If it makes you smile, then I'd gladly repeat it." Men probably would do a lot more just to see her smile. Oh, and now she flushes. Cute. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Alistair, the new Grey Warden."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Alistair," she mumbles, casting her eyes down bashfully.
"You're the first to say so today."

"Didn't have a good start, did you?" she says with teasing sympathy. "My name's Rori." She hesitates for a brief moment, making me wonder if there's more to come. "Just Rori," she then firmly says.

Rori indeed proves to be pretty, even beautiful - and younger than I have expected. Duncan said not to get too excited and he is damn right. Here she is, smiling at me, her blue eyes sparkling. She looks so young and vulnerable, so fragile despite her weapons and armour. Don't get me wrong, there are a whole lot of women who are amazing fighters. I have to know. Ser Eryhn stomped me into the ground at the tourney right before Duncan recruited me. She is amazing with her shield and sword. Still I always feel somewhat guilty when fighting one of them. A girl, woman, female. Especially a pretty young one. Rori I don't have to fight. But I have to welcome her to the Brotherhood. And at the same time I have to keep my distance. It's a tough thing to do because she's witty and sassy next to pretty. I like her sense of humour but liking her too much is rather unwise when she has a high chance to not live to see tomorrow.

"You know, it just occurred to me that there have never been many women in the Grey Wardens. I wonder why that is?" Truth is, I wonder why she is here. But I don't want to blurt out my curiosity. Duncan didn't give me anything to even make a guess. Something about a tragedy - but that makes my imagination run wild and leads nowhere. It could mean anything.

Just Rori isn't going to give me any satisfaction. I will have to ask her later when I find the courage for a blunt approach. "Probably because we're too smart for you?"

Playing games, little girl, are you? "True, but if you're here, what does that make you?"

Now she laughs, a clear and cheerful sound bubbling from her mouth. "Just one of the boys?" she asks sheepishly, raising her hand to tuck a lose strand that isn't there behind her ear. This gesture comes so naturally to her I guess she has only recently cut her hair that short.

"Well, let's go then and welcome to the order. I will accompany you and see you through your Joining with Duncan. Any question, feel free to ask. That's what I'm here for."

She has questions. A whole lot of them. And half of them I cannot answer. Duncan would skin me alive if I told her the truth about the Joining. She coaxes me into telling her more than I actually want or should. Thankfully she doesn't push me to tell her more. "I'll be fine," she just says when I tell her it's not going to be nice at all. She inhales deeply, then nods as if to reassure herself.

"Okay, since you cannot really tell me much about the Grey Wardens, what about you? Or is the life of Alistair a secret as well?" Rori teases.

"I? Oh no, I am just a really dull person." I laugh.

"That's hard to believe."

"Oh, don't get fooled by the cool armour, the long sword and the ruggedly handsome looks. That's just the false front."

"Oh, I don't know... Convince me."

"Well, if you insist... Now, where do I start?" She asked and she keeps asking. So she gets her answers and learns how the bastard from Redcliffe became a Grey Warden. She lets me do all the talking, not giving me much chance to ask her anything. It almost seems as if she was avoiding any questions about herself. I guess, it's better that way. It helps not getting attached to her too much.
Okay, okay, I am dying to get to know more about her... I'm as curious as a cat.

Only once do I get her to answer a question. It makes her uneasy. She avoids looking at me and nervously keeps repeating that gesture of tucking a lose strand of hair behind her ear. The way she holds her head, she'd rather hide behind a curtain of long hair right now. "Did I want to become a Grey Warden?" she mumbles as if it's the first time she thinks about this matter. Seems she has some consideration to do because she falls silent for such a long time that I feel urged to repeat my question. "That decision was taken away from me," she finally answers in a very small voice. "But if I had been asked - without the circumstances being as they were - I guess I'd have said yes."

Rori and I are searching for Duncan. The war camp is buzzing with activity like a bee hive and the old chap has disappeared from the camp fire. We take a seat and wait, silence embracing us while I study her profile. She has a cute heartshaped face with eyes a little too big. It makes her look even younger than she is. Her short hair gives her the air of a tomboy but her facial features are so delicate, the boyish haircut suits her. And her curvy body in that tight leather armour most certainly belongs to a woman. I am staring rather bluntly but she doesn't notice. She's deeply lost in thought.

"Can I ask you some questions?" I shouldn't but I am so curious, I can't stand it any longer. And I rarely do what is best for myself. Like shutting up. She really hasn't been talking much about herself - unlike Ser Jory. All I know about her is her name and that she has an older brother she hopes to meet here in Ostagar. There's more, there has to be more and I want to know. Maybe it's the sadness in her eyes. It's there in the depth of these dark blue orbs. She's cheerful, jesting, trying not to let the mask slip off her face. She's good at it but not that good. Right now she looks like a person who desperately needs a hug.

She snaps out of her thoughts and turns to me. I can't get rid of the impression she's thankful I talk to her. "Sure," she says hesitantly. "I have pestered you with so many questions, I guess, I owe you some answers now."

Yes, she has. But I enjoy talking to her, so I didn't mind.

Her eyes dart towards the pot that dangles over the fire. Her stomach rumbles loudly and I feel like a complete idiot that I haven't asked her if she was hungry.

"Would you like something to eat?"

"Yes, I am starving!"

"Good, otherwise you wouldn't bring yourself to gulp this down," I reply with a laugh. I pour some of the stew into a bowl for her. It looks as if someone has already chewed it before spitting it back into the pot. Handing the bowl to her I apologize. "I am so sorry."

"What for?" Her hands curl around the bowl. She is so hungry she doesn't even wait for my reply but digs into the stew. Three spoons later she slows down and swallows hard. Tears well up in her eyes but she bravely blinks them back.

"As I said, I am sorry." If she survives I shouldn't be too worried about the Joining.

"What is that?" she coughs, looking around for some water. I hurry to ease her suffering and hand her a waterskin.

"Lamb stew. I cooked it." I shrug apologetically.

"You are a horrible cook." She tries to feed the stew to her Mabari. The dog sniffs, whines and pushes the bowl away with his paw. "He's smarter than his mistress," Rori observes.
"Pointing out the obvious now."

"Your cooking skills or my level of intelligence?"

I can't help it. A lopsided boyish grin appears on my face. "Both?"

Rori points the spoon at me like a dagger. "Beware, boy, or I will feed you with that slodge!" She's grinning and the sorrow has vanished from her eyes for now. Mission completed! "So, what did you want to ask me?" Rori inquires curiously.

"Whatever it is, it will have to wait." Duncan has returned. I haven't seen him approaching - no surprise there as I was foolishly gawking at Rori. "It's time for you to summon the other recruits, Alistair. Prepare for your trip into the wilderness."
Korcari Wilds

Rori is staring down at her first darkspawn. The Genlock lies on its back, several arrows sticking out of its torso and neck. Rori tries to pluck some out of it, pulling a grimace at the sucking sound when the arrowhead is drawn from the soft flesh. Ichor flows from the wounds, it's black and smells rather rotten. She looks like she's going to vomit any time soon.

"Are you alright?" I shouldn't be too worried. She knows how to handle herself. There is fear in her eyes but she doesn't let it pour into her actions. How old can she probably be? She looks like 15, maybe 16 but I doubt Duncan would recruit someone that young. Still, young she is but yet trying to act professional, although she has not been trained as a soldier. Unlike Ser Jory who rather wouldn't be here but back in Highever with his wife. Duncan is a good judge of character but I begin to doubt Jory was a good choice. The problem with him is that he has someone to return to.

"Yes, thank you." She doesn't sound as if she is alright. Rori is naturally pale. Now her porcelain complexion has become ashen. But she pulls herself together and straightens her shoulders. I am almost proud of her. Brave girl.

"They are horrendous. You have never seen darkspawn before. I was terrified during my first fight." I offer gentiy.

"Well," she remarks slowly and a cold creeps into her voice that makes me shudder. "At least they show their ugly faces and don't hide them behind the mask of friendship. You never can mistake a darkspawn for something it is not." She avoids looking at me when she talks, turning away so that her face is cast in shadows. Did I mention she seems to call for someone giving her a hug like a drowning man - or woman in her case - would call for help?

"Why don't you ask me if I am alright?" Daveth inquires before I can decide whether to leave Rori alone or ask her if she wants to talk.

"You look like you can take care of yourself."

"Ha! And you think she can't? Don't be fooled by the little girl appearance. She's doing better than the whining Ser. Let me give you a piece of advice, chap, this girl does not need anybody to take care of her. She's out of your league."

I don't know why I get angry. I shouldn't. There's no reason for me to care if Rori likes me or not. Still I feel like I am going to punch Daveth in the face if he keeps smirking at me. Rori saves him - or me. "Are you guys coming or do you want to stand here all day and chat about the weather?"

"You heard the lady," Daveth grins. "And thanks for asking. I am fine."

While we move on, Rori keeps looking around for something or someone - and it's not the darkspawn. She's more interested in any traces of humans passing through the area, ordering her dog to sniff at any trace she thinks is worth checking. It's distracting her and I am not the only one to notice. "Do you have an appointment or something? A rendezvous with a lover out here?" Daveth asks when she again stops to examine a burnt down campfire.

His question makes her jump. "My brother is somewhere in the Wilds," she mutters, blushing as she realizes she's been behaving strangely.

"There's hardly any chance you will find him. If you do, then by mere luck, Even your dog couldn't find him," I point out to her, more gently than I would probably do with any other recruit. The dog
growls and barks annoyedly in reply. "Yes, I know you are a mabari and extraordinarily smart for a
dog. Still, the area is too big." Whining the dog cocks his big head to one side, looking sadly first at
Rori then at me. He doesn't like to disappoint his mistress, although she pets him to let him know it's
not his fault. "Now, we should stop dawdling. We really don't want to be here when night falls."

"Sorry," Rori apologizes compunctiously.

"No harm done. But lets concentrate on what we are supposed to do from now on, okay?" I offer her
a smile. She returns it shyly. Somehow I do hope we will stumble across her brother - alive and still
kicking. It perhaps would chase that deep dark sadness from her eyes.

Ser Jory is a damn good fighter. I just wish he'd shut up. He's been going on about his wife and his
child for ages now. He's even shown Rori her picture in a locket he wears around his neck. Maybe I
shouldn't judge him, maybe I should show more sympathy. If you got nothing to lose this is far
easier. But leaving a wife and a child back home - I can't even imagine how he feels. So I guess I
should stop being unfair.

The knight and Rori are chatting about Highever now and I slow down for some eavesdropping.
Rori answers in monosyllables. All she has yet admitted is that she's from Highever as well. Ser Jory
almost jumps her, having found a fellow sufferer, he talks about Highever as if he's advertising all-
inclusive tours. He's so focused on himself, he doesn't notice how the sorrow creeps back into Rori's
eyes.

"What about you? Do you have any family left in Highever? You're rather young, excuse me saying
so. What about your parents? A husband maybe? A pretty young lady like you..." There's no
escaping Ser Jory. I guess all this babbling helps him to ease his nerves.

"My father was the teyrn of Highever," Rori replies flatly.

"Lady Cousland! Forgive me, I didn't know." Jory bows before she can stop him. She looks
awkwardly embarrassed.

"Just Rori, please."

"Oh, someone high and mighty. How exactly did you end up with us?" Daveth curiously inquires.

Am I the only one to notice she said her father was the teyrn? What in the name of the Maker has
happened in Highever?

Rori tries with pretending to have not heard Daveth's question. He's about to keep pestering her but I
shake my head and he has the decency to let her off the hook. Rori seems almost glad when a group
of darkspawn breaks from the ground and shuts Jory and Daveth up. Not for good but at least she
has some peace for now.

We have the darkspawn blood, some black liquid referred to by the Grey Wardens as ichor, but the
contracts are still missing. It takes a while until we find the tower. It's easier to find a missing sock in
your drawer than to find your way through the Korcari Wilds. When we finally reach the tower -
well, the remains of the tower - the chest is broken and empty. And in addition we gained the
attention of a witch. Daveth next to me gasps when the woman stalks down the slope, moving as if
she was the predator and we her prey. "Hellooooo," he mutters under his breath. She is... wearing...
or not wearing... I don't know what is more scandalous. It for sure doesn't cover most of what needs
covering. Daveth corrects his opinion about her when he figures what she is. Smart boy.

"Are you a vulture, I wonder, a scavenger poking amidst a corpse whose bones were long since
cleaned? Or merely an intruder coming to these darkspawn filled wilds of mine in search of easy prey? What say you? Scavenger or intruder?" the woman purrs as she walks towards us with swaying hips. Her mere sight chills me. All the stories the old templars told the young ones to scare and warn them come back to the surface of my memory.

The only one unimpressed is Rori. She either is rather hard-boiled for her young age or pretty naive. She certainly hasn't seen many mages in her life. "Neither a scavenger nor an intruder. These wilds belong to nobody and that tower certainly is not yours." she replies.

"This is a tower no longer. The wilds have obviously claimed this desiccated corpse. I have watched your progress for some time..."

"You have? Creepy." Rori mutters. At least we can agree on that.

"... Where do they go, I wondered?" the witch goes on, unperturbed by Rori's comment. "Why are they here? And now you disturb ashes none have touched for so long. Why is that?"

"Don't answer her!" I hurry to say before Rori can invite the woman for tea and cookies to have a little chat. "She looks Chasind. And that means others may be nearby." I look around for hidden archers or warriors but can't detect any amongst the trees or behind broken pillars and crumbled walls. Doesn't mean they aren't there.

"Oh, you fear, barbarians will swoop down upon you." the darkhaired witch mocks me. Oh, she can make fun of me all she wants. Caution has never killed a man before.

"Yeah, swooping is bad." I mutter.

"She's a witch of the wilds she is, she'll turn us into toads!" Daveth squeaks. Darkspawn couldn't shock him, this witch is a completely different story. My sentiments exactly. With darkspawn you at least know what to expect.

"Witch of the wilds? Such idle fancies, those legends. Have you no minds of your own?, the witch sneers, sounding both bored and unnerved. "You there!" She motions at Rori, looking a bit confused and lost. "Women do not frighten like little boys, tell me your name and I shall tell you mine."

"My name is Rori Elissa Cousland of Highever...," she promptly replies, first time giving away her noble background. It's also in the way she holds herself, refusing to look away when Jory and Daveth shift their weight uncomfortably and I am as tense as a strung bow. Templar paranoia. "Err... just Rori will do...," she murmurs, running her fingers through her hair uneasily, her expression changing from cocky to grief-stricken again. "A pleasure to meet you!"

"Now that is a proper civil greeting, even here in the wilds! You may call me Morrigan." The witch seems both impressed and amused by Rori's behaviour so unlike my undisguised hostility.

There's no need for Rori or me to tell the witch what we are here for, she knows perfectly well about what has been in the chest - and is here no longer... wait! How would she... ? Oh! That mean, nasty, thieving...!.

"Here no longer. You stole them, didn't you? You're some kind of sneaky witch thief." I am too upset to think straight. Okay, some will claim I hardly ever think straight at all... sometimes I myself wonder about my ability of thinking straight... anyway... let's get those treaties back.

"How very eloquent." The witch mocks me again. She and I certainly won't become friends easily. Actually... never. "How does one steal from dead men?"
"Quite easily it seems. These documents are Grey Warden property and I suggest you return them." I try with being stern. Considering how Rori rather unsuccessfully tries to bite back a grin, I am a complete failure.

"I will not for it was not I who removed them." the witch snaps. "Invoke a name that means nothing here any longer if you wish, I am not threatened."


"Then who removed them? The way you talk about them, you do know. Would you be so kind as to tell us?" Being a noble woman, Rori has far too good manners even around a witch of the wilds.

"twas my mother, in fact."

Her mother!? Another witch for sure. There must be a nest around here somewhere.

"Could you take us to her?" At least Rori leaves Morrigan impressed by both her politeness and her quick conclusion that we have to seek out Morrigan's mother. I don't like that. Not a bit.

"I'll be carefull. First it's 'I like you' and then ZAPP - frog time. We should get those treaties... but... I dislike this. Morrigan's sudden appearance is too convenient."

I add insane to Rori's characteristics when she suggest we should follow Morrigan to meet her mother without any further discussion. Daveth and Jory look at me for a sign of approval. I am torn. My templar training makes me distrust mages in general. This one here is even worse. She is out of control, an apostate, maybe even a maleficar. If anybody had asked me to draw a picture of an evil maleficar it would have turned out as one of Morrigan. Well, the stickfigure version of Morrigan. I can't draw at all.

Rori doesn't wait for me to make a decision. She just prepares to leave. I haven't taken the lead of our little party when we entered the wilderness. I am not a leader type. I prefer to follow. Rori picked up as if she has never done anything else when none of her male companions seemed willing to take over. She points the direction and we follow. Then there's the way she holds herself, talks, walks. She said she's just one of the boys and she's far from holier-than-thou. Still, I'm not surprised that this girl turned out to be more than a commoner.

"Follow me..." The witch notices my hesitation and frowns. Rori beckons her to wait. She takes my arm and pulls me aside.

"What is it, Alistair?" she whispers. I can tell she's concerned and that's kinda sweet.

"You don't really consider this an option, do you?" I hiss.

Rori shrugs as she casts a look over her shoulder at the outrageously undressed witch. "She knows where the treaties are. Without her we will never find them. So yes, I think she is our best option. And unless you want to try your luck with taking her captive and squeeze the information out of her, follow her is what we will have to do,"

"She is a witch. I don't trust her." When I told Rori to be careful, running straight after the witch to lead us deeper into the wilds was not what I meant.

"You've been raised to become a templar. I would be surprised if you did trust her. I don't know much about mages. We had a nice old grandpa mage at home when I was small. I once drew a grinning face onto his bald head with coal when he had dozed off. He used magic to make the
cutlery dance for my entertainment. That summarizes my experience." She furiously blinks back her
tears when they begin to well up in her eyes at the memory of her home. "See, I don't trust her
either," she goes on, her voice sounding a bit choked. "Still, I don't have any better idea how to
retrieve the contracts. Do you?"

I am astonished that she finally has told me something about herself, even more that she recalls that
I've almost become a templar. Sure, she asked and I told her. But I am not used to people actually
listening much to what I say. It's just Alistair babbling.

"I don't want to end my life as a frog. Green has never been my favourite colour. It makes me look
fat."

Rori sighs in exasperation. She even rolls her eyes at me. That's the kind of effect I have on people.
Then she does something so unexpected that I would have never seen it coming. She takes my face
in her small hands and looks me deep into the eyes. There is a determination in her gaze that makes
me recall what Duncan said about her. I feel like someone has just pulled the rug out from under my
feet. Strangely I am not falling. I float. "If you get turned into a frog I'll just kiss you and you'll be
yourself again. I will not allow any witch to hurt you in any way." Thus said, she lets go of me but
her gaze still holds mine.

That is the moment when I gawk at her like a retard and my jaw drops open. It is also the moment for
me to blush deep crimson. Rori just looks at me, innocently unaware of what she just did to me. My
eyes involuntarily are drawn to her rosebud lips. Ser Jory is complaining about the cold. I don't get it.
It's incredibly hot here.

If she hadn't sounded so serious, I'd think she was making fun of me. She took the jesting route,
talking about kissing a frog - and still...

I still stand there and stare when my companions have already fallen into line behind Morrigan. Rori
has to come back for me and nudge me.

"Can we go now? Alistair? Hey, are you listening?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, yes, lets go before I have time to change my mind."
"It wasn't that bad, was it? We have the contracts, Morrigan even showed us back to the camp and you are still you. No frog time." Rori teases after we've returned safely to Ostagar. She has been chatting with the dog guy about mabaris. Her own dog is running up and down the fence, barking at his relatives. "And they didn't cook us either."

"Life has a strange sense of humour, don't you think? This was probably the only time ever I wouldn't have minded being turned into a frog," I muse, watching her pet her mabari. Lucky bastard.

"I would have thought it is your greatest fear. Being forced to wear green for the rest of your life, you know."

"Not with you as a back-up spell breaker." Hey, wait, what am I doing? Am I flirting with her? It's only shortly before the ritual. I shouldn't be here admiring the cuteness of her blush and grinning at her like a drooling fool. As far as I know she is going to gulp down a cup of deadly poison as soon as the mages are done with preparing the darkspawn blood for the Joining. "Err... Let's get back to Duncan quickly. If we wait too long you won't be able to swing a dead cat without hitting a darkspawn."

"Are you ready?" Bless Duncan! He saves me from saying any more stupid things. Rori has turned a deeper shade of crimson. Even her ears are a shining pink. She casts a shy look at me and I manage something that I think could pass as a reassuring smile. She hasn't once faltered. Of course she doesn't know the horrible truth. I feel like an ass not being able to tell her. If this is how Duncan feels any time he recruits a new member, then I really don't envy him.

"Uhm, yes, I think so." She looks nervous as she wipes her hands absentmindedly on her pants. Then the insecurance fades from her eyes and she sticks out her chin defiantly.

"Better leave your dog here," Duncan advices. Smart. We wouldn't want a mabari freak out on us when his mistress drops dead after we made her drink poison. "See you at the old temple. Alistair, I'd like to talk to you before you take our recruits there."

Duncan watches me while he leads me away from the waiting group of recruits. I can feel his eyes upon me while mine don't leave Rori. Daveth is talking to her and the way she crosses her arms in front of her chest and glares at him, she doesn't really like whatever it is he suggests. "Something is bothering you," Duncan observes.

"Yes... no. It shouldn't be bothering me. It's... I now have spent so much time with them, fought with them in the wilderness. And now they all face death. We cannot know who will survive. And although that's what it is like and always will be, it makes me feel sad."

"Is this about them - or about her?"

"Touché! Blame my chivalry. I have wanted to protect her ever since I first saw her. She's so young. And she's a girl." I shrug. "She has no clue what it means to be a Grey Warden. In five minutes she could be dead." My words feel foul in my mouth. I start sounding like Jory.

"Alistair, are you smitten with her?"

"What? No! I hardly know her. She's pretty and smart and I admit I might have been flirting with her. Is that a problem?"
"No, Alistair, it is not. The Grey Wardens aren't the Chantry."

I am relieved to hear him say so. I haven't wasted much thought on romance in the past. In the Chantry romance was completely beyond question. I mean, templars can marry if the Chantry grants permission. But as a brother I was supposed to think of the fair sex only like a gentleman would. And with the Grey Wardens it didn't occur to me - not until Duncan brought back a pretty young female recruit from Highhever. Smitten? No. But I am a man and that includes, uhm, manly feelings. And then there's my white knight disease. "Maybe you should ask her if she is smitten with me."

"Why so?"

"Well, she said, she'd kiss me." Do I sound boastful? Maybe a little. I prance a bit just for the effect.

"She did?" Hey! He doesn't have to sound so utterly surprised, does he? It hurts my ego!

"Yeah, but only if I was a frog."

Duncan sighs. "Do I want to know?"

"No, not really," I chuckle. The look on Duncan's face is priceless.

"Next to her being a pretty young lady, is there something that makes you think she is not ready for the Joining?"

"No, not at all. She is nervous, yes, but determined, too. I have talked to her and she has never shown any sign of regret. I believe she truly wants to be a Grey Warden." I wait for Duncan asking about the other two recruits, but he doesn't. "Hey, you are worried about her, too!" I blurt out.

Duncan sighs and rubs his face tiredly. Right now he looks far older than he actually is. Maybe it's the nightmares he has been suffering from worse than any of us. "When I recruited her...," he begins then his voice trails away and a shadow is cast over his face at the memory. "I made her dying father promise she would become a Grey Warden."

"I thought it was her own wish."

"I guess she would have joined us anyway - if her father would have let her go. She would have liked to follow him and her brother to Ostagar but he wouldn't allow it. I think her mother objected. And her father wasn't too fond of the idea either. With his son and him in danger of dying on the battlefield, he wanted Rori to take care of Highhever. But things changed when Arl Howe betrayed the teyrn and slaughtered everybody in Castle Cousland. Rori is the only one who got away."

I feel like having been slapped in the face. Some things that have puzzled me about her fall into place, the sadness in her eyes, what she said about betrayal, her silent manner when Jory talked about Highhever.

"The teyrn allowed me to recruit her for helping her escape from the castle," Duncan admits.

"But you'd have helped her anyway, wouldn't you?"

Duncan doesn't answer my question but I know him. He'd never have left Rori back there to die no matter her or her father's decision. He of course could have used the Right of Conscription on her. He probably would have. "The teyrn told his daughter she would live and her deeds would change the world," Duncan goes on. His expression is full of sorrow. Now I understand what bothers him. Rori's survival is unsure. If she dies during the Joining Duncan could also have left her back in Castle Cousland. It wouldn't have made any difference.
"At least she has a chance," I offer meekly.

Duncan smiles at me warmly and rests his hand on my shoulder. "My choices are thoroughly thought through..."

"Oh, I never doubted that, Duncan!"

He holds up a hand to silence me. "I only recruit those who might have a chance. Experience is part of my decision but also... instinct. I cannot explain it, but with some recruits I am sure they will survive. Rori is one of the few that I don't worry too much about. It was the same with you. Somehow I knew you would pass the Joining."

"But she still couldn't make it." Now knowing how she got here, I feel so sorry for her, I'd do the Joining again if that saved her from having to endure it.

"Alistair, death is our most faithful companion. In the end we all die. If Rori survives the ceremony she could die in the battle. Or in any other fight. In the end she will have to yield to the Calling."

"Yeah, but that's thirty years down the road... more or less." I feel sick. I don't want to doubt Duncan. I don't want to doubt the Grey Wardens. What we do is right. It is necessary. It is our duty. I feel like betraying Duncan. But Duncan wouldn't be Duncan if he didn't understand.

"Alistair, this is tough for all of us. And it never becomes easy. We do what we have to do for a higher goal. Without the Grey Wardens there is no protection against the darkspawn. Don't worry, you do not have to like this. I don't. I wish it was different and the weight of the loss of all who have died will never be taken off my shoulders."

"I don't know what is wrong with me. It feels like betraying the Grey Wardens. Betraying you." I groan and cover my face with my hands as if seeing nothing is going to stop what is happening around me. This is far worse than my own Joining. I had no idea what would happen back then. Now I know but they don't. Rori doesn't know. She asked about the ritual but I didn't tell her the whole truth and she didn't push me.

"She'll be fine, Alistair. It is time to leave now. We meet at the temple."

I still feel that awfully hard knot in my stomach when we gather for the ritual. Rori's expression is caught somewhere in between sadness and determination. It's the look she wears when she thinks nobody is watching. Her big blue eyes are full of sorrow then. She turns and looks at me and I make a step towards her. Duncan clears his throat and I stop myself before I can do something foolish like take her hand. Instead I just nod at her and her lips curl into the hint of a shy smile. I pray to the Maker that Duncan is right. If not... no, I do not want to think about that.

"Alistair, please!"

Huh? Oh yeah, the traditional words. Duncan wants me to say them. I really should pay more attention to what is happening. This is a grave moment after all.

"Join us, brothers and sisters. Join us in the shadows where we stand vigilant. Join us as we carry the duty that can not be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten." I pause before I add in a lower voice: "And that one day we shall join you." I raise my head and my eyes meet Rori's. She looks so frightened but she keeps her composure with grace and dignity.

Daveth doesn't make it. The poison kills him mercilessly but quickly. I hear Rori gasp. She takes a step backwards and almost bounces into me. It makes her jump. She reminds me of a trapped animal.
All her muscles are tense and for a brief moment I am afraid she's going to run. But she doesn't. Even when Jory fails and falls, she doesn't even try to escape or protest. I don't know if it's shock. She for sure looks shocked. Who wouldn't? This night will add to my nightmares - as if I didn't have enough of those already.

When Duncan turns to her, Rori begins to tremble. She's clearly horrified. Her eyes meet mine but I cannot stand to look at her. I wish I could help her but I can't. She turns around in a circle, clearly calculating her chances and finds there is none. Maybe she could outrun us but where would she go? She'd never make it out of the war camp. So she defiantly bites her lips, straightens and reaches for the goblet, taking it from Duncan. She stares into the dark liquid inside, then raises her eyes to look at Duncan. I hold my breath. She has seen Daveth die. She has seen Jory fall. She has to know there's no way out. Why does she hesitate? Never before in my life have I felt so awfully guilty. Come on, girl, you can do this! I couldn't stand it to see her being killed by Duncan like Jory. I don't know if I could forgive him then.

"Please," she whispers and my hope fails. "Please, tell Fergus if I... if I..." She doesn't complete the sentence but raises the goblet to her mouth once Duncan has nodded his agreement. I let out a gasp of relief.

"You are called upon to submit yourself to the taint for the greater good. From this moment forth, you are a Grey Warden," Duncan drones.

The goblet falls from Rori's hands. She chokes, a spasm runs through her entire body. The pain is excruciating. It feels like being ripped apart, as if your inside is slashed by razorsharp talons, slicing through your intestines with merciless brutality. All you wish for is to die. I remember far too well.

When Rori falls I am there to catch her. We don't want the poor girl to break her skull in addition after having poisoned her. I gently lay her on the ground. Her eyes have rolled back in their sockets and foam has appeared around her mouth. Her body is twitching with violent spasms. It takes longer than with Daveth. Does that mean?

"Duncan?"

"She'll be fine, Alistair."

"Why doesn't she wake up, then?"

"It takes some time. Don't worry."

"But she has been lying here for a while. Do you think she's feeling cold? Should I fetch her a blanket?"

"Alistair! She is a Grey Warden now. Stop thinking of her as a damsel in distress."

"No blanket then."

Duncan finally silences me with a glare when I ask him for the umpteenth time when Rori will wake up and why it takes her so long.

Finally her eyelids begin to flutter and I have to bite back a squeal of delight. I feel like grabbing Duncan's hands and swirling him around in a joyous polka. But a look at him tells me better not to.

Then Rori is back and stares at us bewildered. "Hey there, welcome to the Grey Wardens! I hope you enjoyed the trip." I hold out a hand to help her get back to her feet. She sways worse than I do after having challenged Gregor in a drinking contest.
She stares at both me and Duncan, her eyes still wide with shock, her body trembling from the aftermath of what the poison did to her. Then she sees Daveth and Jory's corpses. "You... you bastards!" she gasps, trying to push me away. Just she cannot stand without my help so she collapses back into my arms. I am shocked by her reaction but Duncan simply chuckles - until she punches him in the face. It's a rather weak punch as she's still dangling in my embrace. But she manages to hit his nose which seems to utterly please her.

"Well, I guess I deserved that," Duncan sighs, rubbing his nose.

"Blast, yes you did!" Rori hisses, blinking back the tears that sting her eyes. She's not yet ready to forgive us. "You... you almost killed me! You killed Daveth! You killed Jory!"

"They knew there was no turning back. And they joined the order willingly - just like you did."

"Did you have nightmares?" I ask. "I had horrible dreams after my Joining." My question causes her expression to soften. She only now seems to realize we've been through this, too.

"I'm not entirely sure I am awake," Rori stammers. "This all is a nightmare!"

"I know it is hard. But that's what being a Grey Warden is like. It's the same for all of us. When I was recruited, I didn't even want to become a Grey Warden. I do know how you feel and so does Alistair." Duncan squeezes her shoulder lightly, a silent gesture of comfort. Rori's lips tremble, she opens her mouth to say something but closes it again, defiantly staring back at Duncan. "Take your time - just don't take too long. We still have a lot to do." Duncan doesn't give her a rest. He's not doing this because he's mean. The upcoming battle is close and while I have to take a message to the other Wardens and prepare for the battle myself, Cailan has asked Duncan to bring the new Wardens along to a meeting. Too bad there's only one who made it. But at least that one is Rori.

I am left back with Rori to watch over her while she recovers. She sits on a broken pillar as far away from me as possible, hugs herself and cries. I feel like a complete jerk as I stand there and watch her. "I am sorry," I finally say before I can stop myself from babbling. "I couldn't tell you even though I wish I could have. It's a secret, you know. Well, obviously. It's not exactly something you tell while having a cup of tea and some biscuits... so, I... you're not mad at me now, are you?"

She looks at me from across that suddenly very vast place. Wiping her snotty nose at her sleeve, she shakes her head, straightens herself and scrambles back to her feet. I offer a crooked smile when she comes to stand next to me and with some delay she smiles back- although it looks rather forced. "I think... I just need some time to cope with this. It's nothing like I expected it to be. After your... warning... I knew it wouldn't be easy. But I never thought it would be like that."

"I'm sorry," I repeat. "It was especially tough for you because you were the last to undergo the Joining. I got to drink the darkspawn blood first, so I did not know how it could kill. I don't know how I would have reacted if I had seen my comrade die right in front of my eyes. You're quite brave for such a little girl."

Now she really smiles, although it's a weak one and that shocked expression has not yet vanished. "Well, thank you," she mutters as she rakes her trembling fingers through her short hair. She looks so small, so lost... and yet she's a Grey Warden. She survived a procedure that killed tall grown men twice her weight.

"Oh, before I forget, there is one last part to your joining," I blurt out when I remember I haven't yet come to that part.

Rori stares at me in blank horror and stumbles backwards. "Wh-what? There's more?"
"Oh, no, it's nothing... unpleasant," I hurry to explain. "Nothing that could hurt you. We take some of that blood and put it in a pendant. Something to remind us of those who didn't make it this far." I pull the pendant from my pocket - a griffon holding a tiny vial in its claws - and carefully pour the blood into it.

"As if I could ever forget that," Rori mutters. She reluctantly takes the pendant from me, holding it as if it was something slimy. Noticing my expectant expression, she sighs and finally puts it around her neck. "I should be going now, right? Meet the king and move on."

"Yeah, if the king wants to see you and Duncan you probably shouldn't keep him waiting. He might get mad, start crying, you'll feel bad and well... it won't be pretty."

I return to the camp to inform the other Wardens about the new sister. There's not many of us. Two dozen if you include Duncan and Rori. Not enough to fight an archdemon and end a Blight, Duncan says. He thinks that's why the archdemon chose Ferelden to make its appearance. There are far more Wardens in Orlais but they won't be here in time for the battle. So it's only us. Nothing to get excited about but Cailan seems to think we are a group of superheroes with extraordinary powers. Well, we're no choirboys but I wouldn't think of myself as a hero. I just do what has to be done. And I am glad I can take part in defending Ferelden.

My brothers are gathered around a campfire. Gregor combs what is left of his beard. That he has any beard left at all is my credit. I splashed my beer into his face when the beard lit like a dry haystack. "Alistair!" he grunts when I step out of the darkness into the ring of light around the fire. The way he says my name it sounds more like Oleestyre. He has a funny accent and I don't understand half of what he says. But I guess it's the same for him because he usually looks confused when I say something. On a second thought, most people look kinda lost when I talk to them.

"How many made it through the ritual this time?" Liam asks. He's a bulky, bald man in his thirties with incredibly bad teeth. On the battlefield he's a berserk but he's afraid of the dentist.

"Only one."

"Who? The thieving bastard from Denerim? He was sneaking around here last night. Thought we didn't notice him," Sawyer snarls. He's the oldest of us, even older than Duncan. His left eye is missing but he never wears an eye patch. The darkspawn doesn't care for pretty looks, that's what he says. He still is the best archer I have ever seen. And his hearing is very sensitive. That's why he always sleeps with earplugs when he has to share a tent with Gregor. I can't blame him. Gregor snores.

"No, the recruit from Highever. Her name is Rori." Obviously none of my fellow Wardens gets as excited about a girl joining us as I do. And I have to be rather obvious because they all grin at me wolfishly.

"Seems our duckling gets the chance to finally get laid," Liam chuckles and slams his hand so hard on my back that I almost stumble into the fire.

"If he doesn't run away again," Sawyer laughs.

Here's a piece of advice: In case you get drunk with some of your friends and they become doleful and start talking about their lovers, don't tell them you never had one. Make up something interesting. And if you can't think of a good story, just shrug and put on a smile somewhere in between borderline ga-ga and dreamily lecherous.

I've learnt that lesson the hard way. They have been teasing me for weeks now. Sawyer even bought
me a whore and sent her to my tent. I tried to talk myself out of it but she was rather determined and I got rid of far too many pieces of clothing before I could escape by crawling out the backside of my tent. I hid inside of Duncan's armor and weapon's chest until he found me there the next morning. He never asked what I was doing there wearing no more than my underwear. One day I will manage to think of something mean enough to pay Sawyer back. Until then I just sulk.

"Rori? Rori Cousland? Tevyn Bryce's little spitfire?" Sawyer croaks. "I already thought Duncan would go to get her when he left for Highever. He wasn't sure her father would let her go."

"He already knew her? I had no idea Rori has met Duncan before. She didn't say anything like that. She punched him straight in the face when she woke after the Joining."

That has Sawyer roaring with laughter. "She did, didn't she?" He wipes the tears of laughter from his eyes. "Duncan met her first when she was a little girl. Six years ago Duncan and I went to Highever again to find new recruits. Rori was eleven or twelve then and we both first thought her to be a boy. Skinny little brat that she was."

"She's not that skinny anymore," Liam laughs and lifts his hands to his chest as if cupping female breasts. "Maker's ass, she has some nice tits! Saw her when she arrived with Duncan. And she's a ginger." He nudges me and smirks. "Good luck, duckling."

Sawyer chuckles. Oh happy day! I'm in for some more teasing. "She beat the shit out of a boy three years older and a head taller than her. I remember, that stupid brat was bullying an elven child. Duncan wanted to teach him some manners but was beaten to it by the girl. Mind you, she didn't fight fair. That girl knows some nasty tricks. She's some sneaky little brat. She broke into Duncan's locked room, found his Grey Wardens documents and fled out of the window before he could catch her. Duncan unsuccessfully chased her around the castle for an hour - and when he returned to his room the documents lay on his bed next to a plate of cookies. She was too young to recruit her at that time. Duncan said, he'd come back for her some day. Seems that day has come."

I want to ask him more about her but a messenger summons me to meet with Duncan and Rori. Seems he has a special task for us.

"Awww, Alistair has to stay back with the girl," Liam teases and the others join into a chorus of laughter.

I just grin. I know them well enough to not feel insulted. "Lucky me, saves me from having to look at your ugly faces all the time." It's time for goodbye and good luck. It's time to prepare for the battle.

"Try to stay alive, duckling!"

They all hug me and I swear Gregor almost breaks one of my ribs. And he smacks a very wet slurping kiss on my cheeks. Eww. I'd rather get licked by Rori's mabari Barkley. He smells better.
The Tower of Ishal

Rori pulls a grimace behind Duncan's back when I arrive. She's clearly not happy with whatever was decided at the meeting with the king. I mouth a question at her but Duncan catches sight of me and beckons me to follow him.

"You heard the plan. You and Alistair will be going to the Tower of Ishal and ensure the beacon is lit." Duncan repeats the orders to us.

"What? I won't be in the battle?" I must have misheard. Maybe I should wash my ears more often.

"This is by the king's personal request, Alistair. If the beacon is not lit, Teyrn Loghain's men won't know when to charge." Duncan's voice leaves no room for a discussion. That doesn't mean I'm not going to start one anyway.

"So he needs two Grey Wardens standing up there holding the torch just in case, right?" I complain sullenly. Cailan couldn't have thought of anything duller, could he?

"I agree with Alistair. We should be in the battle." Rori is as frustrated as I am.

Duncan looks at us as if we were stubborn children - which we probably are from his point of view. "That is not your choice. If King Cailan wishes the Grey Wardens to ensure the beacon is lit, then Grey Wardens will be there. We must do whatever it takes to destroy the darkspawn, exciting or no."

Yeah. Great. This just isn't fair! "I get it, I get it! Just so you know, if the king ever asks me to put on a dress and dance the Remigold I'm drawing the line - darkspawn or no."

"I think I'd like to see that." Rori mumbles next to me. The way she chews on her lips when shooting an upwards glance at me from her incredibly blue eyes almost makes up for having to stand on the top of a tower with a torch in my hand while an epic battle takes place below. At least I am going to stand there with her to keep me company.

"For you maybe. But it has to be a pretty dress."

Duncan sighs in exasperation and rolls his eyes. Maker give him patience. I'm afraid he will find Rori is as much a pain in the neck as I am.

"Would you also dance with me?" Rori asks pleasantly, completely ignoring Duncan's display of annoyance.

"Only to show off my fancy pretty dress. But I warn you, I am an awful dancer. I'd step on your toes."

"Fergus isn't much of a dancer, too. My toes are used to suffering," she laughs but then her face all of a sudden goes blank and the smile is swept away to be replaced by a haunted look of grief. Uneasily running her fingers through her short red hair, avoiding looking at me now.

Duncan clears his throat to regain our attention. "From here, you two are on your own. Remember, you are both Grey Wardens. I expect you to be worthy of that title."

"We have to light a beacon. How hard can that be?" Rori mumbles.

"Come on, we shouldn't dawdle," I sigh.
So I am really not going to take part in the battle. I still cannot believe it. I suspect Duncan does this on purpose. I feel betrayed and try to pry out of Rori what happened during the meeting. I suspect this is all about me being King Maric's bastard. I hate it when people judge me by my father. It has never done me any good and I wish Duncan didn't know. But he does. The way he talks about Maric - if he does talk about him at all - I assume they have known each other.

"Why does Cailan want us to light the beacon? With only the few of us, wasting two Grey Wardens for such a task seems stupid." I rant.

Rori doesn't look too pleased either. "I have no idea. Loghain told him his men could do it, but Cailan insisted you and I should go there. He chose you by name. Not just some other Grey Warden but you. Do you know him?"

He's my half-brother but I very much doubt he knows that. Or does he? I recall some weird moments when I was allowed to be there with Duncan when he spoke to the king and the way Cailan looked at me as if he saw it, I mean, him, Maric, in me. "I don't know him better than any other Grey Warden. Of all of us you probably know him best. You're Teyrn Cousland's daughter."

She shrugs while she straps her bow and arrows to her back, clearly trying to avoid that topic. She also carries a shield around I've never seen her use. Add her sword and her dagger and I am surprised she doesn't fall over. "There's nothing we can do about it now. Come on, as you said, we should not dawdle or you'll get to wear that dress for real when they make us the first Grey Warden court jesters ever."

I grumble and she nudges my ribs like the guys would do. It makes me smile. Just one of the boys.

When Rori, her mabari Barkley and I reach the tower nothing is like it should be. Darkspawn has invaded the tower. That much for Loghain's plan.

"Okay, then lets clear the tower and light that damn beacon. We can throw ourselves right off the top of the tower if we don't get this done in time."

Damn right, girl. I'm glad she's here with me and not Ser Jory. He'd probably leave me standing alone here because it is too dangerous. Alright, I'm being unfair. Jory was the only one who had something to lose. Daveth, well, he was a thief and if not for Duncan he'd got hanged. Rori has lost her family. I never had a family to begin with. Maybe that makes it easier to drink a goblet of poison. There's nothing you leave behind should you die.

Maybe that's why this girl proves to be such a good comrade in arms. We haven't spent much time fighting together. And taking a walk in the Korcari Wilds is totally different from clearing a tower of darkspawn. She has still a lot to learn - especially tactics is nothing she seems to waste too much thought on. But she has other skills and I just think for the both of us when it comes to analysing battle.

We burst in through the doors and I charge forward but Rori stops me. "Shouldn't we first take a look?"

I want to protest because I am not going to let a woman enter a room of darkspawn before me. If I have anything to say about that she'll be behind me as a backup. So I'm at her heels until she turns so abruptly that I almost run into her.

"Alistair, I cannot sneak on anybody if you and Barkley make noise like an elephant herd in stampede." The dog whines and I am tempted to do the same.
"Trust me." She is gone before I can even start an argument with her, sneaking into the room silently. Barkley woofs softly and tilts his big head to one side. I can tell he doesn't like this at all. Same here.

I peek around the corner and watch her crawl further into the room. She has detected something. A trap? When she reaches to undo it, the first arrows begin to whirl around her and Barkley and I charge. I give her cover behind my shield while she fumbles with the string that is attached to a barrel.

"Done!"

"About time!" I peek around my shield. It's spiked with so many arrows that it strangely resembles a porcupine. I jump to my feet, using the momentum to smash my shield against an attacking darkspawn, sending it flying to the ground. Next to me Rori dives under the blade swung against her head and her knee collides with the most private parts of a Genlock. It grunts and topples over, presenting the back of its neck to Rori's swords.

Her way of fighting is far from honourable. I guess if you are a featherweight of a teenage girl fair combat is going to end you six feet under faster than you can spell your name. For Rori with her frail frame this certainly is the best way of fighting.

"Where does all that darkspawn come from? So far away from the horde, they shouldn't be here," I think out loud. It's most annoying, really. Duncan said this would be a stroll in the park!

"Weren't you complaining you wouldn't get to fight?"

This is not what I mean but I guess she knows. There's nothing we can do about it now. and we have to survive to find out what went wrong here with Loghain's smart plan.

When we reach the top of the tower we run into a huge grey skinned monster with mighty horns.

"What the fuck is that?" Rori exclaims.

"Something that's going to smash us like mashed potatoes." I have never met one myself in real. And I certainly could have done without. Duncan has made me look through some books with detailed drawings, so I am quite sure what this is. An ogre. And it stands between us and the beacon.

Suddenly two Grey Wardens seem not enough to light it.

While Rori dodges sideways to find a way around the ogre, I draw its attention to myself. Rori is as limber as a cat, when she fights it looks like a dance. But one well aimed hit and she is gone. I am lumbering compared to her but the ogre isn't a prima ballerina either. I jump forward to strike, then retreat and dance around him as good as I can manage. When its fist collides with my shield, the bones in my arm break as if they are made of glass. I scream and fall to my knees as I try to scramble out of the way. The ogre is grabbing for me, but flinches and howls when Rori slices its Achilles heels. It comes tumbling down and I roll to the side, crashing my hurt arm beneath me. The pain makes my eyes water but I stumble to my feet for another charge.

The ogre cannot get up again thanks to Rori. Barkley snaps at its throat but the ogre just grabs him and throws him away as if he was a rat sized lap dog. Rori makes her approach from behind, running up the back of the ogre to reach its neck but the monster just lets itself fall backwards to bury her beneath its body. With a sumersault she spirals out of the way but its flailing arms send her flying.

I am back on my feet now, adrenaline is pumping through my body, numbing the pain in my shield arm. I cannot move it but as long as I can hold a sword I can fight. The ogre isn't looking my direction when I throw myself at it. My blade sinks into its chest and the impact of our bodies throw
it backwards to the ground. In a last attempt to save its life, it lifts its arms to grab me. My sword sinks deep into its throat and it's over. I jump off of it and turn to Rori. She is limping towards the fire.

"We must have missed the sign. Quickly, we have to light the beacon!"

With trembling hands Rori picks up a torch and holds it at the oil soaked wood. Then she sinks down with her back against the wall.

"We did it," she mumbles exhaustedly. Neither she nor I ever would have thought lighting that damn fire could prove so completely devastating.

I'm afraid that I wouldn't be able to get up again if I sat down now. So I walk to peer over the battlements at the raging battle. My eyes search the horizon for Loghain's troops. Where is he?

Time is passing and there's no sign of him. "He's not coming." I croak, turning to Rori in horror. She looks at me uncomprehendingly and struggles to her feet to join me.

Suddenly there's a noise from the stairs. I whirl around at the same time as Rori is hit by several arrows. I see her fall. There's no time for sorrow, the darkspawn is coming for me. All I can think about is to kill as many of them as possible before they slay me.

"For the Grey Wardens!" I shout. I am prepared to die. It's not as if I have much of a choice anyway. A Hurlock with a nasty sneer turns my way, I raise my sword - and then I am plucked off the tower by something huge. A bird? Or... a dragon?

That mad laughter ringing in my ears. I think that's me.
The beast soars into the sky. I am dangling from its claw, my arm is killing me, all my friends and brothers are dead, Rori is probably dead - and all I can think about is Vaughan Kendells and the cat.

When I was a kid, Arl Eamonn would travel to Denerim each year and we would visit the estate of Arl Kendells. His son Vaughan is a prick. He liked to hurt animals back then and I doubt he has changed much. He's probably worse now. Anyway, one summer, I was eight then, Vaughan caught this old cat that was living in the kitchen. And then he went and threw her off the highest tower. Her crashed body lay in the grass and her dead eyes stared at the boys gathering around her. Vaughan just left her lying there. I used to sleep with the dogs, so nobody noticed when I crept out of bed at night to fetch the cat and bury her in the herb garden. I just couldn't let her lie there.

And now the crumbled body of that cat is haunting me. I am terrified the bird will drop me. At the same time I wonder why I care? I got nothing to lose. Nowhere to go. Nothing to look forward to. So what would be so horrible about falling out of the sky and crashing into the ground?

I think I must have been drifting in and out of consciousness. And I for sure have weird dreams. As far as I know the bird could be a dream, too. Maybe this is the Fade? Who am I to know? The bird must have set me down. I cannot remember when that happened. The next time I open my eyes the face of the half-naked witch is looming over me.

"Hmph, he's alive. Fortune favours fools," she says. Her voice sounds like she is miles away. There's another voice in the background but I can't hear what it says. The witch... Morrigan reaches out to touch me. I don't want her hands on me. I don't want her anywhere close. I try to get up and away from her and my vision becomes blurry.

"Silly ass, keep still. You are going to mess up the healing!"

I drift back into an uneasy sleep. I shift uncomfortably. My arm hurts. My head hurts. There's probably no single spot of my body that does not hurt. Worst my heart. Duncan is in my dreams. And Gregor. Sawyer. Liam and the others. Rori is there, too. She lies in a puddle of her own blood. Her eyes have rolled back in their sockets.

I wish the dreams would stop. I wish everything would just stop. Actually I wish for oblivion. They say that there are demons who can manipulate your mind into believing in an illusion. I am a Grey Warden and an almost templar. Demons are ranking very high on my to-kill-list. But right now if one came to me and went: "Alistair, I can give back to you all those you lost. It will only be an illusion but it will feel real to you. In return I get to absorb your life until you die." Well, I think if that happened I'd be like: "Deal!"

But it doesn't happen. Instead when I wake there's Morrigan's boobs hovering right in front of my eyes. Maker have mercy! I want to go back to my nightmares full of darkspawn!

I sit up so abruptly that I bang my skull against hers and send her tumbling back. "Take your hands off me, witch!"

"Ow, you stupid idiot! I really don't get why mother insisted on rescuing you." She rubs her forehead and pulls a face.

"Your mother rescued me?"

"Of course she did. Who do you think that huge bird was that carried you and your friend away from
the tower? The archdemon?"

As far as I am considered it could have been the archdemon. Two wild witches are very close to my idea of how evil the archdemon is. "My friend? You mean Rori?"

"Yeah, the redhead and her stinking dog."

"But Rori is dead. I saw her die!" I can't believe what Morrigan says. I don't feel like I can endure any more hope that then fails, casting me deeper into the darkness that surrounds me.

"You saw her fall. But you didn't see her die. She's quite fine. If she will be as well once she figures she is still loaded with you, I doubt it."

"Where is she then?"

"Resting of course. The things people do while recovering."

I cannot stay in bed any longer. I have to get out of here, away from Morrigan. I need fresh air. I stand so abruptly that I almost faint. My vision goes black and when I can see clearly again, Morrigan is there with her arms crossed in front of her chest.

"I'd put something on if I were you."

Only then do I notice that I am completely naked. I flush from head to toe, quickly cover my most private parts with my hands and glare at Morrigan. She seems bored. "What did you do? Where are my clothes? Why did you undress me?" I squeak. That much for sounding manly and strong.

Morrigan rolls her eyes and sighs. "You were covered in blood and your arm was broken. All we did was heal your injury and clean you and your clothes. I still don't know why we did it. One of mother's secret plans, I guess. It has to be something big or she wouldn't waste her time with someone like you." Morrigan points to a chair. "Your clothes, armour and weapons. Once you are dressed, mother wants to talk to you."

I hurry to cover myself properly, then flee from the hut. There's no place far enough from Morrigan I can reach at the moment. So standing in front of her hut will have to do. Her mother is sitting on a wooden bench, reading. She puts the book down when I stumble out of the hut.

"Ah, so at least there's one of the Grey Wardens left. With a bit of luck the second one will join us soon."

"Where am I? What am I doing here?" I feel panic rise inside of me. I am alone in the Kocari Wilds with two apostates. This is like the worst nightmare of any templar.

"If I didn't know you are the dopey one of the two of you I'd be worried now," the old hag says, completely unimpressed by the fact that my hand rests at the hilt of my sword. "Relax, young man, you will see your friend again soon and then we can discuss the matter at hand seriously."

That said she picks up her book again and goes on reading. I blink and stare, wondering if I should force a conversation. But actually I am glad nobody wants to talk to me. Not when there's so much I have to think about. So much to digest.

I stand there and stare. My eyes don't focus on anything specific. It's as if I watch right through what surrounds me. The pain inside my heart is agony. I cannot believe Loghain didn't show up at the battlefield. I want it to be a mistake, maybe he was detected and attacked by the horde. Maybe something else happened. Something that would perfectly explain why the army that was meant to
help Cailan and the Wardens abandoned them. In my heart I know there is no excuse. I know this was murder. Loghain murdered his king, and even more important, he murdered Duncan and all the other Grey Wardens. He took away what got closest to a family for me. He took away my home.

"See, here's your fellow Grey Warden. You worry too much, young man," the old hag says behind me, pulling me out of my gloomy thoughts. I turn to meet a very pale Rori. Her knees are wobbly and she looks as confused as I feel, but there she is. Her face lights with a shy smile when she sees me.

"You... you are alive." Of course she is, stupid. She's standing there right in front of you, isn't she? "I thought you were dead for sure."

"Nah, I hurt too much for being dead," Rori replies, sounding surprised that we both are here. "I'm glad I'm not... dead I mean. And even more glad that you are not... dead... thanks to Morrigan and her mother. Boy, would you have ever thought we'd get rescued by two witches? Somewhat ironic, isn't it?" She laughs. It sounds rather choked. "That's the third time I almost die within no more than a week," Rori adds sulkingly. "It's getting rather old."

"Oh, this doesn't seem real. If it weren't for Morrigan's mother, we'd be dead on top of that tower." It actually sounds so unreal, I have to repeat it to myself.

"Do not talk about me as if I am not present, lad," the old hag reminds me of her presence.

Oh. Ouch. Being rude to a witch doesn't seem a good idea, does it? "I... I didn't mean... but what do we call you? You... you never told us your name."

"Names are pretty but useless. The Chasind folk call me Flemeth. I suppose that will do," the old woman remarks as if this was of no importance at all.

"Aunt Agatha told me stories about Flemeth when I was a child," Rori murmurs, taking one step closer to me. Then another. "Creepy stories. You're not that Flemeth, are you? You don't look that scary."

I cast a startled glance first at Flemeth, then at Rori. My fellow Grey Warden answers with a shrug. She's as confused and wary as I am. "The Flemeth? From the legends? Daveth was right, you're the Witch of the Wilds, aren't you?"

"And what does that mean? I know a bit of magic and it has served you both well, has it not?" Ah, yeah, well, it has. Obviously. Just what price will we have to pay?

"So, why did you save us?" Rori asks curiously, probably wondering the same. "It had to be quite an effort to get us from the top of that tower, so certainly you did not do this to turn us into frogs. What does the Witch of the Wilds care for two junior Grey Wardens?"

That is a very good question. If I wasn't so busy mourning my loss, I'd have grabbed Rori's hand and ran for the hills with her by now. My templar instincts tell me not to trust Flemeth no matter what she did for us.

"Well, we cannot have all the Grey Wardens dying at once, can we? Someone has to deal with these darkspawn. It has always been the Grey Wardens' duty to unite the lands against the Blight - or did that change when I wasn't looking?"

"It changed when most of them were slaughtered! I've only become a Grey Warden yesterday. I know absolutely nothing about what is happening here!" Rori points out. "How can we possibly deal with all this all alone?"
"Hey, don't look at me," I mumble. "I am as clueless as you are."

"If you think small numbers make you helpless you are already defeated." Flemeth snorts.

"Well, you cannot deny that some backing wouldn't hurt," Rori retorts. "The whole you against the rest of the world stuff sounds great in adventure stories. It doesn't work in real life. We will need support. Lots of support if we want to have a chance at all." Rori runs her fingers through her short red hair tiredly. "Seems we have to figure this out then. We cannot just do nothing at all."

"But we were fighting the darkspawn!" I cry out. "The king had nearly defeated them. Why would Loghain do this?" That's something I just cannot understand. It absolutely makes no sense to me at all. I feel I could cope with this easier if there was a reason I could understand. Or I am fooling myself. I don't know.

"Now, that is a good question. Men's hearts hold shadows darker than any tainted creature," Flemeth says solemnly. "Perhaps he believes the Blight is an army he can outmaneuver, Perhaps he does not see that the evil behind it is the true threat."

"The archdemon." I gasp.

"Loghain cannot be that dumb, can he? The way my father always talked about him, he is a great man, a hero." Rori wonders. "I mean, he saw the darkspawn. And then his first idea is to betray his king and run from the battlefield? What kind of hero is that?"

"One that is still alive?" I remark gloomily. Rori puts her hand on my arm in silent comfort. First I flinch but meeting her gaze I see the grief and sympathy in her large blue eyes. She even manages a shy smile and surprisingly I smile back at her.

"What exactly is the archdemon?" she asks, returning to business. She has already set her mind on getting this done, despite having no clue how.

Flemeth tells the tale about the old gods - which actually makes neither Rori nor me none the wiser.

"We should contact the rest of the Grey Wardens then, shouldn't we? Something as big and dangerous as an archdemon doesn't sound like anything one would want two beginners to mess around with," Rori puts it in a nutshell.

"Cailan already summoned them," I tell her. Duncan advised him to and Cailan listened - mostly - to Duncan. "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."

Rori groans, kicking a nearby stone into the lake angrily. "How can anybody be so ignorant and foolish and... stupid? This cannot all be about Loghain getting more powerful. Nobody can be so incredibly dumb!" She's cute when she rants. She clenches her fists at her sides and sticks out her chin defiantly and her cheeks burn red with anger. It almost makes me chuckle.

"Well, whatever Loghain's insanity, he obviously thinks the darkspawn are a minor threat. We must warn everyone this isn't the case," I exclaim.

"I'm afraid we have to do far more than just warn them." Rori sighs, looking both tired and stubbornly defiant. "We need an army to fight the darkspawn. Now, anybody got any idea where we could find one?"
I only switch out of my mourning stupor when we reach Lothering. I still cannot believe what has happened. They are gone. All of them. Dead. I will never see them again. Everything went wrong. I should have been fighting with them, I should have died with them. Instead I am here, and I don’t even know where here exactly is.

Rori picked up when I dropped everything at her feet. For a moment I panicked and thought she would leave me alone when she said I was the real Grey Warden, not her. Instead she took right over when I didn't even attempt to. She has been leading us here, us being Morrigan - however we came to be loaded with her! - Rori, Barkley and I. It's quite unfair to make her end the Blight all on her own while I only trudge after her.

"Glad you are back with me," she remarks, smiling warmly at me, when we are done making plans that sound so vague that I don't even want to call them plans. Still, trying to get to Arl Eamon sounds like the best idea we can probably follow.

"I'm sorry...," I begin but she interrupts me.

"No harm, done, Alistair. Actually I acted the same way during my journey to Ostagar with Duncan. I understand how you feel."

Blast it! I am so sucked up with myself that I keep forgetting she has lost her family. I haven't once asked her about it. I haven't once cared to check if she needed any comfort, someone to talk to while she listened patiently to me when I unburdened my heart to her. She offered words and gestures of comfort and I gave her... nothing. I feel like a complete moron now.

Rori goes and makes it worse when she slides the shield she has been carrying along off her back. I've been wondering why she would drag it along as she prefers a two-weapon combat. With the shield on her back she reminds me a bit of a turtle. A very cute and extremely dexterous turtle.

"Here." She hands the shield to me. "Take it. Yours broke during the fight with the ogre. You need a new one."

I look at the crest on the kite shield and finally it begins to dawn on me why she wouldn't leave the shield behind. Heraldry wasn't part of my templar training but Arl Eamon played this game with me when I was a kid. If I could guess the crests at the toursneys we visited correctly, he would buy me a gift or some sweets. Once in Denerim I did so well that he bought me a miniature golem doll.

"But... this is your family shield... It's a Cousland heirloom. I cannot accept such a gift from you."

"As far as I know I am the only Cousland left. Fergus could still be alive. I hope he is but I have to be realistic about his chances. That makes you... You are what comes closest to family for me now. Please, take it." She sounds so serious and so sad at the same time. She's probably right, though. We are the last two Grey Wardens in Ferelden. We got noone to turn to but each other.

"This is an honour I do not deserve."

"Alistair!" she cries in exasperation. "If you don't take this shield right now I swear I am going to bash in your pighead with it."

"Oink," I go and she raises the shield. Much effort for such a petite and frail girl. If she doesn't watch out she'll topple over. "Alright, here's the deal." Rori squints her eyes at me suspiciously. "I will borrow that shield from you. And you can take it back whenever you want."
"Deal."

And that's how I get a new shield and Rori gets someone to carry her family heirloom.

"So... Arl Eamon...," Rori says when we march into the village. "I have met him a few times... can't say I made much of an impression. At least not a good one." She grins sheepishly, looking all compunctious and guilty. She even squirms a bit. "He and Father got along quite well... especially when they wanted to convince the king of doing something Loghain didn't like. Mostly when it got something to do with Orlais."

"You didn't make much of an impression?" I prompt. Did I mention I'm as curious as a cat?

"Oh, you know, I was one of the flower girls at his wedding with Lady Isolde... and... err... those flower girl dresses weren't made for climbing trees and play tag in the stables... And I lost all the white rose petals from my basket. Replaced them with wildflowers. The Arlessa wasn't amused."

"Oh, now I remember," I laugh. "That was you?"

"Yeah, that was me," she mutters, blushing deep crimson at the realization that I was there, too. "I'm sorry, I can't remember having met you there."

"I wasn't really taking part... The Arlessa wasn't particularly fond of me. I was in the stables, hiding up in the hayloft. I saw you running around with the other noble children." Actually only boys but her. She was wearing a pale pink silk and chiffon dress and matching boots. Isolde was fuming for weeks after, when one of her flower girls appeared all covered in mud and Eamon still made his bride let the girl take part because of her high and mighty parents.

"Why didn't you come down to play with us?"

"I was a shy boy." Truth is, they had made clear I wasn't to mingle with the nobles. Well, Isolde had made that clear. I didn't understand what I had done to her to despise me that much.

"But why weren't you at the wedding? You weren't hiding from that, too, were you. Oh... you weren't invited?" Rori asks after a moment. The way she frowns she just put two and two together. "But... you said Arl Eamon raised you?"

"Did I say that? I meant dogs raised me. Giant slobbering dogs from Anderfels. A whole pack of them in fact."

"Really? That must have been hard for them," Rori laughs. "And fun for you," she adds after a short pause.

"Well, they were flying dogs, you see. Surprisingly strict parents, too - so much for the fun - and devout Andrastians, to boot."

"So, they did not let you ride them? Riding flying dogs, that has to be like riding a griffon. They certainly miss you terribly. Do you write at least? I bet your mother's a bitch." The moment the words leave her mouth, she claps her hands over it, eyes wide in shock of what she has just said.

"All right, all right! I give! I cannot match your rapier wit," I laugh before she can even start to stammer an apology. She's cute when she blushes. "Let's see... how do I explain this? I am a bastard." Rori opens her mouth for another remark but I cut her short this time. It's one of my weak spots and I don't feel much like taking the jesting route this time. "And before you make any
comments, I mean the fatherless type. My mother was a serving girl in Redcliffe Castle who died when I was very young. Arl Eamon wasn't my father but he took me in anyhow, put a roof over my head. He was good to me and he didn't have to be."

"So you know who your father is?"

"I know who I was told was my father. He died even before my mother did, anyhow." That's the first blunt lie I ever told her. I don't know why I do this. It's self-protection, I guess. I just cannot make myself tell her the truth - that King Maric was my father -, although it makes me feel awfully guilty after all the comfort she has tried to give me after Duncan's death. All the time when she talks to me, it seems she does care. But fact is, I do not know her. And she doesn't know me. For me, the man who sired me, who never took any interest in me, never cared, he indeed could have died even before my mother did and it wouldn't have made any difference. "It isn't important." And another lie. Now after Cailan died, even I have to admit, someone could believe my Theirin bloodline to actually be important. Oh Maker! I do hope nobody gets strange ideas about that. I feel fine being just Alistair.

"But Arl Eamon sent you away to the Chantry. Why would he do such a thing when he cared for you?"

"The new Arlessa resented the rumours which pecked me as his bastard. They weren't true but of course they existed. The Arl didn't care. But she did. So off I was packed to the nearest monastery at age ten. The Arlessa made sure the castle wasn't a home to me anymore at that point."

"What a cruel thing to do to a child," Rori murmurs, squeezing my hand comfortably. To say I'm surprised by this gesture is quite an understatement. It makes me feel even worse for having lied to her.

Lothering is crowded with refugees. I do hope they do not plan to stay and wait for the darkspawn. At the church Rori stops in front of the chanter's board.

"The Chantry is still running the Chanter's Board? Now THAT's dedication!" I laugh.

"Good for us. We are broke. We need some money and if we don't want to start a second career as robbers like these pricks on the road, this sounds like a good idea, don't you think?"

See? That's another reason why Rori is the better leader. For a noble woman she's incredibly pragmatic. I have to keep that in mind for Morrigan if she ever asks me again why I don't take the lead. We need money, Rori finds a way to earn it. She doesn't sit and fret and wait for others to do the job for her. She just does it. She certainly grew up in luxury. Still not once have I heard her complain about her situation. When I ask her about it, all she says is: "If complaining and wailing got me anywhere, I'd complain and wail all day long. But it won't change a thing. Doing something instead, now, that can improve my situation. So I certainly won't waste time and effort on something that can't."

"That's a rather grown-up and pragmatic point of view for a noble woman your age."

"Blame my father. He always used to say: 'Pup, don't wait for things to happen, make them happen."

So instead of becoming robbers ourselves we kill some - and I get another proof for Rori's pragmatic nature when she raids the corpses of the slain men without even flinching.
She notices me staring at her while she rummages through the pockets of a decapitated man. His head has rolled to one side and the dead eyes glare at Rori accusingly. "What? He doesn't need the coins anymore. We do."

"I'm a little surprised a noble woman would do something like that." It has never occurred to me before to sack the belongings of the dead. With darkspawn I'd rather not touch them. With other opponents I kind of feel it would disgrace them. Even a criminal deserves some respect.

"They are dead. It doesn't hurt them, Alistair." Rori pulls at a heavy purse that got stuck under its previous owner. "We are Grey Wardens. We do whatever is necessary to end the Blight." Her stomach rumbles loudly. "And at the moment it is necessary to feed this Grey Warden to keep her from starving."

"At least one of you has some common sense," Morrigan remarks dryly as she drifts past me. I wish she would disappear. Rori thinks she is useful. Same kind of useful as raiding corpses.

Rori isn't always that brave and pragmatic, though. When we explore the area around Lothering in search for some boy's mother, she pokes her head into a cave - and screaming as if the archedemon itself was chasing her, comes running towards me, jumping straight into my arms. "Spiders!" she squeaks, her face ashen.

"You are afraid of a few itsy-bitsy tiny spiders?" I laugh and almost choke on it when I see the arachnoids emerge from the cave. They are as big as full grown stallions.

Rori hides behind me. "Save me, white knight in splendid armour! Kill the itsy-bitsy tiny spiders!" she teases.

That's what my big mouth gets me into over and over again. "I guess, I could do with some help," I mutter, grinning sheepishly.

"I can cheer for you? No? Oh well..." She gets her bow ready. "But I'm not going anywhere near that beasts!"

After we've passed in and out of the Chantry the third time, Rori has had about enough of the wailing lunatic that has been driving the people crazy with his apocalyptic clamour. She turns on her heels and pushes past the crowd gathered around the ranting man. "Oh shut the fuck up!" she snaps at the darkskinned man. She has to tilt her head back to actually look him in the eye.

"There, one of their minions is already amongst us!" the man screams, pointing at Rori. The people around him have been scared by his words but now some begin to chuckle. Rori is a rather small young woman with a pretty heartshaped face, large blue eyes, rosebud lips and bright red tousled hair - she looks like a doll, certainly not like a darkspawn minion. She casts a quick glance over her shoulder at me but all I can do is shrug. I do not know how this man could tell she carries the taint inside of her. I have never heard of people being able to sense a Grey Warden.

"Listen to yourself! You're acting like a complete idiot," Rori hisses, arms akimbo. "I am not going to stand here and just wait for the darkspawn to come. Nothing is lost yet if we just pull ourselves together and do something! We can still defeat them."

"That little girl got stones," one of the villagers remarks on passing by. She is a tall woman with short dark hair and blue eyes. She has a younger man trudging behind, clearly her brother. "You should listen to her, not him."

"Hawke and the girl are right. Let's leave now. Maybe we can reach Denerim."

"..."
"You should leave, too," Rori tells the stranger after the refugees have left and the lunatic has come back to his senses.

"First I have to convince my mother to leave. She can be rather stubborn."

"If necessary I just carry her!" her brother exclaims.

"Now, I really want to see that, Carver," the woman chuckles.

"I've been in Ostagar," Carver says in a hollow voice. "Mother just has to listen to me!" He turns to us, frowning as he tries to figure out where he has seen us before. "You were there, too, weren't you?" he asks. "Is it true what they say, that the Grey Wardens betrayed King Cailan?"

"It is not!" I exclaim, anger flaring inside of me.

"If they betrayed him they certainly wouldn't all be dead now," Rori points out. "What an intrigue should that be where the traitors all die due to their own plan? And what would they have gained from murdering Cailan? Loghain is the one who walked away from the battlefield."

"I couldn't believe these stories about the Wardens. I was there and saw them fight. One of them, dark skin, black beard, fought with a sword and a dagger, he even saved my life," Carver mumbles. "Now all we can do, is run."

The siblings bid their farewell to us. I doubt we will ever see them again. I just hope they make it out of this village before the horde arrives.

We set up camp outside Lothering this night. Next to an evil witch Rori has added a creepy Qunari to our group and an ex-sister with crazy visions. I am not sure if I like this. Rori isn't sure either but she's downright practical, so who am I to complain? I forced the role of the leader upon her as I wasn't willing to take it. To criticize her decisions now seems wrong. I look at our little party and sigh. An ex-noble and ex-sister, an almost templar, a full-time witch-bitch and a grumpy Qunari murderer. I swear the dog is the only one normal here. "More crazy? I thought we were all full up."

"We need all help we can get. Didn't you say the good thing about the Blight is how it brings people together?" Rori teases.

"Aw, that's not fair! You're using my own words against me!"

Rori grins impishly. "Well, what can I say, I am a mean person."

"You are not! Morrigan is mean. You are... cute."

"Cute?" she laughs. "Raiding corpses is cute?"

"When it's you raiding them, yeah, I think it is." The look on her face makes me reconsider my words. "This didn't turn out like I wanted it to sound. I sound like..."

"... a creepy deviant?" she completes my sentence. If not for the twinkle in her eyes and the smile that tucks at the corners of her mouth I could feel offended. But with Rori this is a game we play. I enjoy how she isn't miffed by my habit of jesting whenever I try to hide my true feelings. Too many people just tell me to give it a rest and start to grow up and be serious. Rori doesn't do that. I can't say how much I enjoy these little verbal battles with her.

"I do, right? Oh blast it, that much for trying to make a good impression. If you excuse me now, I will go and sit with the other nutcases."
During my watch I notice Rori is tossing and turning on her mat. I can hear her groan and sob in her sleep. I have no idea if Duncan told her about the nightmares - I think I might have mentioned but I am not sure. I gently shake her awake, making sure she isn't too startled. I know she sleeps with her dagger at hand and I don't want to risk her stabbing me out of fear and confusion. She wakes with a startled cry but I catch her hands, trying to be gentle, before she can punch me. "Hush, it's only a dream."

She's pale, her eyes huge and frightened. "It felt so real," she whispers, hugging herself. I don't know what to do so I seek refuge in making a joke out of it. A wry smile is my reward. We decide to move on and I go and wake the others so that we can get going. Well, I trick Barkley into waking Morrigan by throwing a stick for him right into her tent. He bursts through the entrance and next I hear Morrigan scream bloody murder.

Haha!

While we pack the tents and other stuff Rori has purchased with the raided and earned money, I notice that our leader is missing. I cannot remember when I last saw her so I leave Morrigan with Sten and Leliana and search for Rori.

For a brief moment I am terrified that she has left me alone. I have no reason to believe she'd just run but being left behind is something I cannot cope with easily. It's a fear that makes me go cold inside. I look around the camp and follow a small path towards the brook. The birds begin to sing, greeting dawn. The night turns grey, the sun bathes the horizon in soft flames of pink, orange and red.

I find Rori crouching at the side of the brook. She is hugging her knees to her chest and she's sobbing. Blast it, I should have seen this coming. How could I expect her to cope with everything? She saw how her family got murdered, then we made her drink poison without giving her as much as a hint of a warning before. We threw her into a horrendous battle against the darkspawn and if that wasn't enough, I burdened her with the problem of ending the Blight. It is she who has to make the decisions while I stay in the background because I feel unable to get anything done right.

Even now when she sits there and cries I retreat. I keep telling myself it's because I don't want to invade her privacy. Truth is, I am a coward. One step backwards, then another. I step onto a dry branch with the third and she looks up at the sound of snatching wood. I freeze when her red rimmed eyes meet mine. My heart skips a beat. I am trapped. What to do now?

I am still occupied with the process of thinking when my feet carry me towards her. I kneel down next to her, wondering what I am doing here. "Hey," I coo softly while I caress the side of her face with my thumb. "Don't cry."

Obviously this is the wrong thing to say because she only cries harder - and throws herself at me, her arms wrapping around my neck, she buries her face at my chest. I hold her, feeling her body tremble in my arms. It feels strangely right, as if she belongs there. The urge of protectiveness returns to me. I was too busy with myself and my own grief to pay attention to anybody else. There's no words to express how sorry I am.

And yet she is the one to apologize. "Sorry," she snivels, when she shrugs out of my embrace. Her eyes are all puffed and red, traces of dried tears smear her cheeks.

"No harm done, Rori."

"I greased your shirt with snot," she points out.

"An improvement, if you ask my opinion, all those blood stains from the battle were getting rather
old. I was looking for a new adornment anyway."

She laughs and snuffles, then wipes her nose at her sleeve.

"Whoa, here, you can have my handkerchief. It is clean! I promise. At least cleaner than my shirt."

"There's a knot in your handkerchief."

"Yeah, it shall remind me of something I should not forget."

"And what is it you have to remember?"

"I don't know. I have forgotten."

"Oh, Alistair!" Rori laughs. Oh, how I love that sound of her ringing laughter.
Our little party is on its way to Redcliffe. Our newly achieved horse carries our tents and all the other stuff Rori and Leliana think necessary for camping. With Loghain looking for us we should avoid the inns. It's saver to camp someplace outside the villages. Also more uncomfortable but nobody complains. Better to be freezing and wet from the rain than dead.

Morrigan plucks herbs that grow at the side of the road. At least I do hope it's herbs and none of the fifteen poisons she mentioned when we appointed her to become the chef. Rori is silent today. She either walks in front or behind but never with us. Recalling how upset she was yesterday, I decide not to leave her alone this time. She doesn't look at me when I walk beside her, her eyes are cast down as if her boots are the most interesting thing in the world.

I gently nudge her side and Rori immediately nudges back. Oh, I know that game! It's an all time favourite amongst boys too young to shave. And obviously amongst the last two remaining Grey Wardens of Ferelden. I nudge back and so does Rori. She still stares at her boots but she is grinning, so I nudge her again. A few moments later nudging has turned into shoving and in the end we shove each other into the ditch, laughing so hard we have trouble climbing out of it again.
Morrigan glares at us, her arms crossed in front of her chest. "Are you drunk?"

"No," Rori gasps as she grabs my hand and allows me to help her out of the ditch.

"Then silliness obviously is infectious."

Morrigan walks away before I can shove her into the ditch. I so can't stand her - which prompts my next question since Rori now - although she has wet feet and her boots make squeaking sounds when she walks - is far more cheerful than before my infectious silliness.

"May I ask your opinion about our companions?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Morrigan is useful. Leliana - well, who can tell what she really saw? She believes in her visions and she can shoot an arrow straight in the eye of a man and does so without hesitation. Sten, creepy but Rori guesses there's more to his story and the reason why he murdered the family. I don't agree with all her opinions but I guess I don't have to. It should work for me as long as it works for her.

"So, you trust them?"

"Trust?" The smile is wiped off her face by my question. Her features harden and ice creeps into her voice. "No, I do not trust them." She pauses, grinding her teeth. Her breathing has become heavy and I truly regret I have asked. When she speaks again her voice is low and bare of all emotions. "My father trusted Howe. The Arl called him 'old friend' on that very day only a few hours before he betrayed and murdered my father. He even suggested I should marry his son. He must have known already that we wouldn't live to see the next day." She bites back the tears that well in her eyes, wipes them away with her sleeve when her efforts fail. "I made clear I wasn't interested. Sometimes... sometimes I wonder if my answer condemned my family to die. If I hadn't turned down that thought right away, maybe Howe would have seen a possibility to gain more power through a marriage... maybe..."

I take her hand and squeeze it gently. I cannot watch how she tortures herself. "It's not your fault. Nothing you did or said could have changed anything. He only wanted to lull you to believe in everything to be alright."

"You're probably right." She straightens herself, inhaling deeply to regain her composure. "I am going to make him pay." If Rendon Howe could see her that moment, the cold hatred that burns in her eyes, he'd regret to ever have alienated her. I have no doubt that she will find and kill him - and it won't be pretty. "Howe murdering my family, Loghain betraying Cailan, Arl Eamon's illness, you don't think that's a coincidence, do you?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if Loghain planned this all for a long time. But why? That's what I don't understand."

"Me neither. We should ask them before we send them to their final destination."

When we pass by a farm, Rori wants to see if we can buy some food but the place is abandoned. The inhabitants are gone and the thick puddles of dried blood we find in the courtyard tell their own story.

"Darkspawn?" Rori asks, scanning the surroundings for any danger.

"I can't feel any nearby."
We neither find the farmers nor any darkspawn. Rori takes whatever she thinks is useful from the house. She even picks the blasted locks of anything that is not meant to be opened by anybody without a key.

"May I ask how a young noble woman comes to know such things as picking locks? And the way you fight..."

"Blame Aunt Agatha," Rori laughs. "Grandpa wanted her to marry Rendon Howe." She spits his name out as if it is something foul and rotten. "Agatha, however, had her own plans. She didn't want to marry a man she didn't love. I think she was more into women anyway."

The Chantry is not too fond of relationships between two women - or two men. But of course I know they exist. I really haven't wasted too much thought about it, though. Still, Rori mentioning her aunt, makes me curious. No idea why I think this is of any importance. I mean, it shouldn't be of any importance, right? "And... what about you?"

"About me?" She looks up from the items she has lifted out of the chest. Is she as clueless as she seems or does she play with me?

"Well, I was wondering..." I begin to sweat. How to ask a girl if she is preferring women over men? It's something I have never inquired before with anybody.

"Yesss?"

"I was wondering why a woman your age wouldn't yet be married," I blurt out.

That earns me her full unshared attention. "A woman my age!?!" She rises to her full - rather unimpressive - height. "Are you calling me a spinster, Alistair?" Oh, that soft sweetness in her voice. It's chilling.

"Never, dear lady. Perish that thought!" I put my hand over my heart and do my best to imitate Barkley's puppy dog eyes. "But you have to admit for a noble woman it is quite unusual not to be married at the age of..." I look her up and down and make a quick hopefully not fatal guess. "...18?"

"I only turned...um... 18... a week ago!" she exclaims with exaggerated indignation.

I quickly count back and pale. "But, that was the day of your Joining! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would that have changed anything? Would you have wrapped a bow around the goblet? I didn't really feel like celebrating anyway."

"I... I am sorry. I really don't know what to say." I feel like a complete jerk now.

She shrugs. "It's alright. I survived. Felt a bit like being reborn."

"Sorry," I apologize once more.

"Alistair, really, don't worry about it." She gives me a reassuring smile. Then she returns mercilessly to the question that has initiated this conversation. "You aren't married and you are older than me."

Only by one and a half year it seems. I turned 19 shortly before becoming a Grey Warden. "I am a man." Wrong thing to say. "And a Grey Warden," I hurry to add. Doesn't make things better. "And before that I was supposed to become a templar. And templars don't marry. I mean, they can but only with the Chantry's permission. And that doesn't happen often. Actually, the battlefield of love is none templars should ever be found upon."
"That's a whole lot of excuses," Rori remarks dryly. "Well, here is mine: I just never met someone I
could fall in love with. Not as good as yours but for me that's good enough. I didn't want to spend
my entire life with someone I don't care for."

I agree with her but I also know that for noble women love is a luxury. "Didn't your parents choose a
groom for you?"

"Oh yes, they did. They constantly tried to marry me away ever since I turned 14."

"And... what happened?"

"I told them this so wasn't going to happen."

"That's it? They let you get away with that?"

"No, not really. First there was this tourney - or should I say, there was supposed to be a tourney?
And the winner should be my groom."

"What did you do? Win the tourney?"

Rori snorts. "As if I had stood a chance! No, I let Barkley into the kitchen and while Nan was
chasing him, I dropped aperient into the soup."

"You... poisoned them?" I sound as shocked as I am.

"Just a little bit." At least she has the decency to look guilty. She grins sheepishly at me. "In the
morning when the audience had assembled for the tourney none of the knights showed up. But they
all recovered. No harm done."

"Until now I was worried Morrigan could poison us some day. I can't believe you did that!" If she
hadn't just confessed her crime herself I certainly wouldn't believe it.

"And I wasn't brought up by flying dogs, so I don't have any excuse to offer for my lack of
appropriate behaviour," she teases. Ahh, she has been listening to me again. "It was a desperate
deed. The tourney was supposed to be part of my birthday party. That's not unusual amongst the
nobility. However, I wasn't prepared to leave with a husband I didn't know at all. There was no way
I could have stayed in Highever once I got married. It felt like they didn't want me there anymore.
Like losing home."

That I can understand. I felt the same when Arl Eamon sent me away to the Chantry.

"Didn't you get in trouble?"

"They couldn't prove it was me. Anyway, afterwards they tried with a more personal approach. They
kept inviting possible grooms - and I kept making sure they were so not interested. I was a very bad
daughter. Thankfully my parents have... had such a good sense of humour. After some time Mama
changed her tactics. She wouldn't dress me up for meeting men anymore but arranged the meeting to
be less pressing. I often didn't know they had invited someone until I met him at the dinner table."

She falls silent, staring down at her fingers while she is lost in memories. With a deep sigh she
returns to the here and now when I am about to leave. "Thinking about it," she

"You don't have to explain. I understand."

"Yeah, you do." She pockets the money she found and follows me outside. "Thinking about it," she
muses. "I should have been alarmed by Howe suggesting Thomas to me. He was present more than once when I scared men away. Thomas liked me, though. He's four years younger than I am. I guess a fourteen year old boy still thinks it's funny when a girl appears for dinner wearing her panties for a hat." Now, I so wish I could have seen that!

"There wasn't a single one you liked?" All the things she said, it doesn't sound encouraging at all. I feel my spirits sink.

She thinks about this for a while. "I liked Curtis. I had a crush on him but he was some Arl's bastard and there was no way my parents would have allowed me to marry him. I was so furious that I doubled my efforts to scare any other man away. This is my choice not someone elses."

"You have a soft spot for bastards then?"

She tilts her head to one side and smiles at me in a way that makes my heart do a somersault. "Obviously."

Tomorrow we will reach Redcliffe. I am nervous. Someone could mention that I am more than just a bastard. Not that I regard myself as something special. Still, my father was King Maric and people use to get excited about that fact - mostly unpleasantly excited. I don't want to be reminded of it. I'd rather be just Alistair. However, as soon as people know who my father was, things become complicated. I am aware of how their behaviour changes. Those who knew Maric seem to look for him in me. I always feel like a complete failure then.

Still I cannot have anybody else blurt it out to Rori. She deserves the truth from me. I couldn't look at my reflection anymore if I was such a coward as not to tell her myself. She's my only fellow Grey Warden left and she's... oh, I don't know. My grief is like a heavy layer of blankets that suffocates any other emotion. Rori... she is beautiful and I enjoy her company... she makes me laugh... and smile... and she gives me these strange moments when my heart seems to skip a beat... And then I feel guilty. Duncan and the others died and I am here, alive and flirting with my fellow Warden when I should be dead like them. I feel like I don't deserve this. What makes it worse, I sound like a complete loser when these thoughts keep circling round and round in my head - until Rori appears and breaks the cycle.

I am tending my weapons, sitting away from the rest of the group, lost in gloomy thought when she's suddenly there with my and her bowl in hands. "Food time," she says, slumping down next to me, balancing the bowls. She shoves mine at me and I stare at it suspiciously.

"Cooked by the swamp witch with the knowledge of fifteen different poisons and served by the girl who gave more than a dozen knights the runs - should I dare?" I tease.

Rori groans and pouts. "I should have never told you. You will reproach me with that forever!"

"Only until I find another way to make you pout. You look incredibly cute when you do so."

Oh, and now she blushes! Pouting and blushing, could she get any more adorable? My gloomy thoughts fly out of the window. They are not far away, though. Another reason for me to feel guilty later but with Rori it is impossible for me to mourn as I should. Although I haven't spent much time with Duncan I know he wouldn't like it - all the mourning I mean. He never was a man to wallow in selfpity and regret. But that is why he was the leader of the Grey Wardens in Ferelden and I am... well, I am loading all the responsibility onto Rori's narrow shoulders. Yes, that's what I am, a full grown man hiding behind a younger and less experienced girl. Congratulations, Alistair! You better don't get attached to the illusion she could possibly like you.
While I eat my stew I watch Rori wolf down hers. She stuffs so much of her bread into her mouth she can hardly chew. It makes me grin, then chuckle when she produces a small box of cookies, an apple and two rather squashed looking sandwiches from her backpack and begins munching. Rori glares at me but can't say anything with her mouth so stuffed she looks like a chipmunk. Now I really can't stifle a laugh anymore.

"What's so funny?" she asks once she has swallowed. Before I can answer she's back to stuffing herself with food.

"You are," I answer honestly. She reminds me of myself after my Joining.

Again a quick reply is prevented by the fact of her having stuffed half an apple into her mouth. "I am glad you find me so amusing," she finally says. "That gloomy look you carry around most of the time doesn't suit you. Whatever I have done I should do it more often if it makes you laugh."

I like the sense of humour that girl has. She doesn't think of herself as so high and mighty that she cannot accept any joking at her cost.

"So what was it like with the other Grey Wardens?"

Sometimes I forget that Rori has never gotten to know them. I am the only other Grey Warden and as I haven't been part of the group much longer I am not very reliable when it comes to give her information. I wish Duncan had told me more. He used to say that I would find out sooner or later. 'You'll see.' was one of his most favourite lines. Now I wish I had pestered him some more. I doubt Rori would have accepted a 'You'll see'.

Her questions bring back memories of the best time of my life ever since I was sent away to the Chantry by Arl Eamon. "They were quite a group. We were kin of a sort. We also laughed more than you'd think. There was this one time... well, you probably don't want to hear stories about men you didn't know."

"Weren't there any women?"

"Not as Grey Wardens. Not when I was there. I have seen pictures but none was as pretty as you." That makes her blush again. I am aiming for a blush highscore with her. She's a redhead so her blushes are specially beautiful against her pale skin.

I tell her about Gregor. Or was it Grigor? His accent was so bad I didn't even get his name right. And his beard was the fuzziest I have ever seen. I myself prefer a clean shave. Okay... I'm vain. My face is just prettier than Gregor's. With a face like his my beard would be even fuzzier. I just would have to wait twenty years or more for my beard to become that fuzzy. Wait, that's not part of the story... Yeah, the drinking contest.

"Seems like you had a lot of fun," Rori observes. She's right. We all knew we would die. Yeah, everybody dies sometime sooner or later. But not like that. Being a Grey Warden is not all about funny drinking contests. And still I rather became a Grey Warden than a templar. I even don't mind Duncan made me gulp down poison while the lyrium addiction the Chantry provides for the templars makes me real furious. I can't say where the difference is - both claim it's necessary. I guess it's that with the Chantry I feel it's tokenistic.

"I'm told that Duncan walked in later and saw us all passed out from one end of the hall to the other, and Gregor still drinking." I finish my story. "Duncan laughed until he nearly... until..." There it is again. I hate it when memories I am fond of get tainted by the grief that hovers above me like a raincloud.
"I'm sorry. This must be hard for you." Rori always makes it sound as if she really cares. I have not once gotten the impression she just says something because it's expected, something she thinks I would want to hear. People often do that, especially when they hear that King Maric was my father. As far as I am concerned Arl Eamon and Duncan were far closer to a father than the king who sired me.

"It just struck me that I have nothing to remember Duncan. Nothing at all." I'm that kind of person. I need something to remember. Not because I would forget. It's for comfort. That's part of why it still haunts me that I destroyed my mother's Andraste amulet, although it's been years since I lost it.

"You have your memories of him." She takes my hand and squeezes it lightly before she lets go again. I wish she wouldn't. I like the feeling of her small hand in mine.

Then there's silence. The only sound is Rori devouring the cookies. Good thing she gets so much exercise. She notices I am watching her and offers one to me.

"These look suspiciously like Sten's," I say.

"Because they are Sten's."

"He gave you his cookies?" I can't believe it. I asked him if I could have one yesterday and he growled at me. That was the only answer I would get but as he sounded a lot like Barkley and as taking away food from the dog is suicidal, I decided Sten could keep his cookies.

"Uhm, well, he didn't exactly give them to me..."

"You stole them!?"

"I was starving!" Rori defends herself. "And he ate Barkley's Mabari cookies so we're even."

"Is that also something you learnt from Aunt Agatha?" Rori's moral conception seems as flexible as she is. I am used to the black and white opinions of the Chantry so it's not that easy getting used to her pragmatic point of view. Duncan was the same. He always said Grey Wardens have to do whatever is necessary to fight the darkspawn. I am not sure stealing Sten's cookies comes under fighting the darkspawn. Considering the changes Rori is experiencing after the Joining it could be justified, though. I also felt like starving right after the Joining. There could never be enough food for me. I'd probably have stolen Sten's cookies, too. The difference is that I would have gotten caught and Sten would have skinned me alive while her quick fingers picked his pockets unnoticed.

"Agatha was an adventurer, not a thief. Her lover, Elsa, though, she was what you'd call a rogue. She taught me a lot of things."

"Things like stealing, picking pockets, poisoning?"

"It can prove very useful to be an adept pickpocket. Or to know how to detect and deactivate traps."

True. Rori has kept me from stepping into several said traps already.

"So how did this Elsa end up teaching you?"

"Agatha would return to Castle Cousland every winter and leave again each spring for her adventures. She and her companions would play games with Fergus, my cousins and me. It started with Elsa showing me how to pick locks and I was allowed to keep whatever she put in the chest I opened. Then there were these games when I should pick something out of the pocket of a straw man. There were dozens of small bells attached to it and whenever I wasn't careful they would ring."
Rori’s voice is laced with the excitement these dear memories cause. Her eyes sparkle with the giddiness she must have felt as a child when taking part in these games.

"Later Agatha and Elsa would think of treasure hunts that would lead me through the whole castle. There were riddles to solve, locks to pick. Sometimes I had to steal a key or fight a monster that was Agatha or someone else in disguise. My father would often play with us. Mother, too, although she would also complain how childish this was. Agatha and her group kept the whole castle busy during long cold winter days."

She keeps referring to her aunt in past tense. While she talks her voice becomes softer, sadness creeps into her tone mixed with melancholy and sorrow. I am quite sure Agatha is as dead as the rest of her family.

"The winter after the tourney that didn't take place Agatha didn't return for her winter break. I felt betrayed because I had hoped she would allow me to accompany her. It was a hard time for my parents and me. We didn't get along too well then until they gave up trying to force me into a marriage and I gave up behaving like a complete lunatic. I don't know what happened to her. I keep telling myself she travelled somewhere far away. Antiva maybe. But four years later I probably should accept that she is dead."

Well done, Alistair! Now you've made her sad again. I can't stand that look on her face. I want to hug her and tell her everything is going to be alright - but we both know it will never be alright again. We cannot bring back the dead.

That's when Rori says: "It's good to talk about them to someone... to you."
The Royal Bastard

Rori has been watching me for a while. And whenever I look at her, she looks away. I start a game
of acting as if I don't notice her stare, then turn so abruptly that in the end she runs straight into me
because she's too busy staring at my... whatever it is that catches her interest.

Now we are so close she has to tilt her head back to look at my face. She examines it for a while as if
she has never seen it before. This is a little awkward...

"What? Do I have dirt smeared across my cheeks? Something got stuck between my teeth?"

"Nooooo..."

"Then why are you staring at me like that?"

She bites her lower lip, tilts her head to one side, considering her reply. "Has anyone ever told you
how handsome you are?" she finally blurts out.

"Not unless they were asking me for a favour." Not that Rori would have to make compliments to
get whatever she wants from me. "Well, there was that one time in Denerim, but those women
were... not like you." That blush again. She even squirms a little, kneading her fingers nervously.
"Why, is this your way of telling me you think I'm handsome?"

"My lips are sealed." She motions as if using a key to lock her lips.

"Oh, I get it. I'll get it out of you, yet." I laugh. "So is this the part where I get to say... the same?"

"Not unless you think so." Sounding so timid now. How can she do that? Jump from blunt to shy
and still it doesn't seem as if she's acting. It's just how she is, this mixture of uncertainty and
straightforwardness. Sometimes it's as if she gets surprised by her own bluntness after she blurts out
whatever is on her mind.

"Oh, I think so. I'll just spring it on you when it's a surprise." Like you did with me.

"Fair enough," she mumbles, grinning rather foolishly. Not that I look any smarter that moment.

So here we are: Redcliffe. It feels a bit like coming home although I realize it never was and never
will be home for me. I'm as homeless as Rori and I guess she's right when she calls home whereever
we are - together. Her words give me more confidence for what I have to tell her now. Or it makes
things worse. Maker, I am nervous! I wouldn't mind any smart comments from Leliana or more
snappish remarks from Morrigan. But Rori... if Rori's reaction to my heritage would change anything
between us... now I'm feeling sick to my stomach.

Blast, I should have told her before! Courage, boy, you'll need it!

So, here we go. "Can we talk for a moment? I need to tell you something." I take Rori's elbow and
drag her away from the group. The way they stare after us they are dying to know what's going on. I
try to keep my voice low. "I should probably have told you earlier. So the reason why Arl Eamon
raised me was because my father was King Maric. That makes Cailan my half-brother."

Rori blinks. Blinks again. Yeah, i know, hard to digest. But Rori isn't that easily thrown out of
balance. She has mercy and says something before I start squirming. "So you're not just a bastard but
a royal bastard."
"Ha, I should use that line more often now," I laugh nervously, I'm so relieved she isn't mad at me. I still owe her an explanation. It's the way people react on me. It changes as soon as they know. I don't like that. I want to be Alistair and not the - royal - bastard.

"Shall I call you Prince Alistair now?" Rori pokes my side. She doesn't seem to mind I kept my heritage a secret. Sure, she's noble herself, maybe it wouldn't shock her as much. Or that's just how she is. I shouldn't have any doubts in her. She isn't that lukewarm. The things she does and says, that's something more than just us being fellow Grey Wardens, isn't it? I feel it's more but I'm not really sure. Lack of experience. Flirting is fun but when you are an almost-templar, flirting doesn't lead anywhere. You can tell a lady how pretty she is without her regarding your comment as more than politeness. And when she tells you in return that you are handsome... well, that's nothing to get excited about. But having Rori blurting this out, that's something totally different.

"Just Alistair will do."

"Did Cailan know about you, Just Alistair?"

"Rubbing it in now, aren't you?" I chuckle. "I doubt he did. He never really talked to me. I saw him once when we were boys but he hardly noticed me. So no, not much of a relationship there between brothers. For me he always was the prince and later the king. I never regarded myself as a prince."

"Although Prince Alistair has a nice sound, don't you think?"

"Only when you say it."

Rori giggles and curtseys gracefully. At times like that you can see she indeed received an etiquette training. There's different ways of bowing and curtseying, depending on your own status. The lower it is the lower you bow. And I dare say I just received the Teyrn daughter meets Prince curtsey. With anybody else that would have me feel uncomfortable. But the twinkle in Rori's eyes gives her away. She's teasing me. Well, after it took me so long to tell her I deserve some teasing. "You flatter me, Prince Charming!"

"I don't know why you make such a fuss about his heritage," Morrigan remarks dryly. "He has been a pain in the ass, now he's a royal pain in the ass. I wouldn't call that an improvement."

It's a rare event but this time Morrigan makes me laugh. "If it means my presence becomes even less endurable to you, Morrigan, then I'd call it an improvement," I reply smuggly.

"It's a good thing your chances to become king are so low. I'd have to imigrate to Orlais if someone got the idea to put you on the throne. The dog would be a better choice."

Barkley woofs his disapproval. We both don't want to become king.

"Anyway," I say, "you probably knew Cailan better than I did."

"When King Maric visited Highever he would bring Cailan along. But I only once got to play with him. Twelve year old boys usually don't play with five year old girls. But I pestered Fergus until he and Cailan agreed I could join the game. I was allowed to be the princess they would rescue. They tied me to a tree at the far end of the park and gagged me - and then forgot I was there. They just went away and never returned."

"Charming"

"I stood there for hours. I was hungry, cold, uncomfortable and in the end I wet myself. They only noticed I was missing when I didn't show up for dinner."
"Now I don't think Cailan not taking interest in me was such a bad thing after all."

"Fergus was so sorry he let me have his dessert. Cailan only said sorry because Maric told him so. Later I sneaked out of my room and peed into Cailan's boots. She's so cute when she's smug. She reminds me of a cat they had in the Chantry. Whenever the Revered Mother would forget to let her in at night, she would pee onto something that belonged to Revered Mother. Mostly her shoes.

"You didn't!" Of course she did. This is Rori! It sounds exactly like something she would do. "Well, I guess it served him right."

"It was a nasty surprise for him when he stepped into his boots the next morning," Rori remarks cheerfully. "I so wish I could have seen the look on his face." Vengeful little spitfire! I make a mental note to watch my back with her.

"But then they started to look for the culprit and blamed Gavin, one of the elven servants. So I had to confess. I couldn't let poor Gavin take the blame. They would have hurt him."

How can someone not adore that girl? She couldn't have cared. For so many nobles servants, especially elves, are lesser beings. When I imagine that little five year old girl step in to save a servant, it makes me all mawkish. And proud. She's someone to be proud of despite all the crazy things she does.

"What did they do to you then?"

"Mother was shocked. Father laughed. King Maric laughed. Cailan was fuming but his father told him he had learnt a useful lesson: Never to underestimate a woman's wrath no matter how young she was. As Cailan hadn't yet gotten punished, Maric and Papa agreed that Cailan and I were even. Cailan acted as if I wasn't there until he and Maric left. But a few years later I met him again, then the story had become one of his favourites to tell and he could laugh about it."

It's weird to hear her talk about him. I almost feel like I now know him better. Now he is dead I regret I haven't gotten the chance to talk to him at least once. Dead he became more of a brother than he ever was before. Does that sound stupid? Probably. I can't really explain it. I always kept my distance, never tried to make myself noticed. Cailan reminded me of the father and family I never had and at the same time I didn't want to destroy what he had.

We meet Teagan in the Chantry once Tomas has informed us about the monsters. Oh, yeah, why should anything ever be easy?

"Bann Teagan!" I greet him when I see his familiar face. He didn't visit Redcliffe often when I was there but I fondly remember the times he did. "You perhaps don't remember me. Last time we met I was much younger... and covered in mud."

"Covered in mud? Alistair! I was worried you could be dead! Finally some good news!" Teagan exclaims. His greeting is warmer than I would have expected. It's good to see him again. Until he begins to flirt with Rori.

"So, are you married?" he asks with far too much interest.

"No, I'm not."

And Teagan obviously hasn't heard of how hard she worked to stay single or he'd not get so excited about it. That moment when he smiles at her I would happily feed him to the darkspawn. I stare daggers at him to draw Teagan's attention away from Rori. He frowns and that sickly sweet smile disappears from his face. Then he turns and our eyes meet. His expression gives away his confusion.
I admit I am close to hostile. Teagan only half notices Rori bids him farewell. I only half notice she calls my name. This is a guy stare contest and I am going to win it.

"Alistair?" Rori waves her hand in front of my face.

"Huh?"

She takes my hand and her voice teasingly takes on the quality of adults speaking to toddlers. "We have to leave now, Alistair. Kill some undead, save Redcliffe, rescue the Arl, remember?"

"Uhm, yeah, sure." Behind me I hear Teagan chuckle.

As I know Redcliffe, I become Rori's guide when she helps the villagers prepare for the upcoming battle against the undead. Morrigan trudges behind, clearly thinking this is a waste of time.

"You really don't like this, do you?" Rori asks her.

"What are we going to do next? Rescue kittens from trees?" Morrigan remarks sourly.

"Okay, then let me tell you this: we have to build an army. And when you do so you also recruit peasants and commoners - which you can't if they are already dead. And once you got your army to fight the archdemon and the darkspawn, you have to feed it. It also needs armours and weapons. You might think of this as a waste of time, I don't. Because all these people here will remember we helped them. They will be soldiers, smiths and merchants, farmers and healers and whatever else an army needs and they will be glad to assist." Thus said, Rori turns on her heels and leaves Morrigan standing there.

"That's... a rather practical point of view," I comment. I'm not sure I like this. Of course Rori is right. But I'd rather just have her help because we can and these people need us.

"When talking to Morrigan you have to speak to her in a way she can understand."

Whatever her reason, she does best she can to make sure everybody is ready for the battle, talking to the major, convincing the dwarf to join the fight, making the elven spy we find at the inn help defending the village.

All the while I can't get rid of the impression there's something bothering her. She keeps herself so obviously busy and she avoids looking at me. I'm getting nervous. When I can't stand it any longer, I take her by her arm to pull her aside. I have to talk to her. "What is wrong, Rori?"

First it seems as if she is going to shrug my question off but then she blurts out: "Why did you keep your birthright a secret?"

"You never asked?" And there I thought this wouldn't be a problem with her. Stupid to even believe she wouldn't be influenced by my blood.

For a moment she just stands there, staring at me dumbfounded. Then she frowns and with her arms akimbo she almost snaps at me. "I... how could I have known? And I did ask! You told me all these things about your mother and how Arl Eamon raised you. You said your father died even before your mother did! That was a blunt lie then, wasn't it? Why did you do that? I thought..." She runs a hand through her hair exasperatedly, then hugging herself she says in a very low and small voice: "I'm... hurt you didn't trust me."

When she first almost jumps in my face I am prepared for an argument. But now I see the disappointment on her face and hear the sadness in her voice, I feel like a prick. "No, please don't
think that," I hurry to say. "It's not that I didn't trust you. Please let me try to explain." I wring my
hands, trying to find the right words. "The thing is I'm used to not telling anyone who doesn't already
know. It was always a secret. Even Duncan was the only Grey Warden who knew. And then after
the battle when I should have told you... I don't know. It seemed like it was too late by then. How do
you just tell someone that?"

"How about: By the way, I'm the heir to the throne?"

That certainly would have been the Rori-Cousland-way of handling that matter. She'd just have
blurted it out somewhere in between killing darkspawn and cooking supper. But that's not how I
handle things. Sometimes I envy her for her bluntness. Sometimes she scares me, most of the time I
am simply dumbfoundedly surprised. "Yes, well... I suppose part of me kind of liked you not
knowing."

"Why? What happens when people find out?"

"They treat me dierently. I become the bastard prince to them instead of just Alistair. I know that
must sound stupid to you, but I hate that it's shaped my entire life. I never wanted it, and I certainly
don't want to be king. The very idea of it terrifies me."

"It doesn't sound stupid at all. I was always glad that Fergus was going to inherit the title and all the
responsibility."

I didn't realize she could feel the same with her being the leader she has proven to be. It's not like I
thought she would be looking forward to leading but it has never occured to me that the
responsibility of being a leader could scare her. "For all the good it does me. My blood seems certain
to haunt me no matter what I do. I guess I should be thankful that Arl Eamon is far more likely to
inherit the throne. For what it's worth, I'm sorry for not telling you sooner. I... I guess I was just
hoping that you would like me for who I am. It was a dumb thing to do."

"But I do like you!" Rori protests. "I mean, my father was one of the most powerful men in all of
Ferelden. I am of noble birth - and... did I ever treat you as someone lesser when you made me
believe you were the bastard son of a maid?"

I wince, shake my head and offer a very very foolish grin as an apology. She never was aloof around
me. "No, you didn't," I admit. I already felt like a complete idiot before. I didn't think I could top that.
Boy, was I wrong.

"Your now revealed heritage doesn't change anything. I couldn't care less if your father was a king
or a peasant. I just want you to be honest with me."

"I am sorry. I should have known better than to assume you would judge me by my heritage.
Especially since you didn't before. That's quite something considering you're a Cousland."

"Father always told Fergus and me, it's not alone our bloodline that makes us noble but also the
things we do and how we treat others. He said, people would always bow to our name, but that we
should strive to earn their respect. He always treated others, no matter their birth or race with
respect."

"Sounds as if he was a good man."

"He was," Rori whispers sadly.

"He'd be proud of you. I am sorry I didn't tell you. Forgive me."
"Don't worry about it. No harm done." All the talking about her father has made her uneasy. Her voice sounds choked by the effort of blinking back her tears.

I smile shyly, squeezing her hand comfortably, and she beams back at me, although it seems a bit forced. "I guess, it's kind of a relief you know now."

"I think, I even understand why you didn't tell me. That probably sounds strange from someone like me. But I know that moment when people start treating me differently because they figure I am Teyrn Cousland's daughter. It's really awkward situations - just I was taught to accept it as something normal and that the benefit it gives me is a birthright. I was also taught, that I have a responsibility because of that birthright. That I should never just take it for granted." She forcefully kicks a stone into the lake before she goes on, her voice both sad and amused. "One day when I played tag with Fergus and Gilmore while Father was talking to the merchants at the market in Highhever, I ran into an old woman carrying a basket with apples on her back. She toppled over and lay on her back, flailing like a beetle. The apples had scattered all across the road. She cursed at us, demanded we paid the damage and tried to hit us with her walking stick - until Father appeared. When she realized who Fergus and I were she apologized. She was so scared as if she expected to be executed. Father had us help her back to her feet, he made us apologize and we picked up the apples for her. And we paid for the damage we had caused. The poor woman was so stunned, she was completely dumbfounded."

Rori falls silent, chewing at her lower lip as she remembers this day long ago when her world hadn't yet come crashing down on her. I feel helpless, unsure what to do, how to comfort her when her grief is so obvious and she's so bravely trying to pull herself together.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, sounding as foolish as I feel.

"It's alright. Really. I'm fine. But I better stop telling tales now or I'll be still bawling my eyes out when all the undead come." She angrily wipes some tears from the corners of her eyes. "I'm glad we talked about it." She cocks her head to one side, squinting her eyes at me. "You don't have any more secrets, do you?" she asks, poking my side.

I grin, poking her in return. "Besides my unholy love for fine cheeses and a minor obsession with my hair, no. That's it. Just the prince thing."
Castle of the Walking Dead

Night falls and grey mists rise from the lake. We're as ready as we can be when the undead approach. I can smell them a mile off. Some of them really have been dead for a while. But the smell isn't the worst thing. I don't know what I expected, where the undead would come from... Of course I know that they are walking corpses of normal people who died. People who lived at the castle. Still I am absolutely not prepared for familiar faces staring back at me. It's been almost ten years, but many I still recognize. I almost drop my sword at the sight of Martha, the cook that used to chase me out of the larder whenever she caught me stealing cheese. And there's Harold, the old scholar I drove crazy by doodling stick-figures or dreamily look out of the window when I was supposed to listen to his lectures...

I chop his head off and I swear he wears the very same accusing expression he wore when he caught me not paying attention.

Oh what a night!

"Merciful Andraste! What is going on within the castle?" I gasp once the new day dawns with us still alive and the undead dead. For real this time. Is there any hope left at all for the Arl and his family? Teagan and I run around looking at every dead face when we pile the corpses up on a pyre after a long night of fighting. We look at each other with utter relief when we can confirm none of them is Eamon, Isolde or Connor.

I am so exhausted I can hardly keep myself on my feet, still I'd rather head for the castle right away and check on Eamon instead of celebrating our victory. I change my mind pretty fast when it turns out the celebration comes with a splendid breakfast including bacon and eggs, cheese and twelve different cakes - much to Sten's delight.

"Thank you, Alistair," Teagan says as he pats my shoulder amiably.

"I did nothing. Rori is the one you should thank." She, however, is nowhere to be seen. The whole village has assembled, celebrating their heroes while the protagonist is missing.

"She's a remarkable young lady but she didn't defeat the undead on her own. Don't hide your light under a bushel, Alistair. You are better than you believe. You've always been," Teagan extols me.

First I think, he's making fun of me until I look him in the eyes and see... pride. He is proud of me! I am so stunned, I forget to chew the cheese I stuffed into my mouth and gape at him like a complete fool. I'm not used to that much praise. It leaves me flustered. "Err... I... well, thank you, I guess... this time I didn't make a pig's ear out of it."

"Not at all," Teagan chuckles at my obvious discomfort. "Maybe you should look for your little redhead?" he suggests.

"She is not my redhead," I splutter all flustered. Oh, stop grinning like that, Teagan! We have a Blight to end, right? Can't forget about that just because Rori happens to be... well, Rori... Oh blast! Did I sigh out loud when I thought that?

"Oh, I don't think she would mind," Teagan remarks with a heavy sigh. "If you don't want to go, I could?" he offers, sounding far too hopeful for my taste. Rori is my... um... fellow Grey Warden. Yes, that's exactly what she is and I should be looking for her. Now.

"On my way," I mutter, hurrying off with Teagan chortling with undisguised amusement at my
I find Rori sitting at the pier, dangling her feet. Bevin next to her bounces around excitedly as Rori tells him the suitable for a child version of last night's battle. I can't get rid of the impression, Bevin wouldn't mind some gross details.

"Thank you for lending your sword to me, Bevin. I never would have made it without."

The boy beams from ear to ear, radiating pride. "You better keep it when going to the castle," he offers generously.

"That's very noble of you, Bevin. I don't know how I could manage without. I promise I will return your sword as soon as possible."

"When I am grown up, I want to be a hero like you and Alistair," the boy says in awe. He jumps to his feet and waves a stick around in a poor imitation of fencing. "Take this and die, rotting corpse!" He whirs around some more, suddenly catching sight of the still smoldering pyres on the hill. That has the kid sober-up within a heartbeat. We all tend to forget that a hero requires a tragedy until we're confronted with it. "I just wish my mum was here," Bevin snivels. Tears well up in his eyes, despite him angrily trying to blink them back.

"Me, too," Rori whispers sadly. I somewhat doubt she's talking about Bevin's mother. She seldomly mentions her family and if she does, it's often only short remarks before her voice fades, leaving her speechless with grief. She grew up beloved by her family. Her life was truly sheltered. And then she got tossed into this nightmare. She acquits herself so well, I keep forgetting what she has gone through while I am busy feeling sorry for myself and mourning Duncan. Just because she doesn't lament all the time, doesn't mean she's not hurting, though.

"Have to go," Bevin blurts out all of a sudden and runs off. With his future career plans he of course can't cry in front of his idol. Makes for a bad reputation. Especially when he's a man crying in front of a woman. Absolute no-go.

I slowly approach, slumping down next to Rori. Her lips pressed to a thin line she stares at the lake, eyes wide open to stop the tears from falling. She snivels and wipes her nose at her sleeve. Grinning, I shake my head and hand her my handkerchief. Rori manages a shy smile before blowing her nose noisily. Then she leans her head against my shoulder.

Just like that.

Without any warning.

There's a strange fluttering in my stomach. Not like the one you get when being sick. More like... a warm and fuzzy feeling - and I find myself grinning from ear to ear stupidly. After a moment's hesitation I wrap my arm around her waist.

For a while we just sit and watch the lake. It's strange how peaceful it looks in broad daylight. I feel totally comfortable until I turn my head slightly and now the castle's in view. And BANG! there comes the guilt crushing down on me again. How can I sit here and enjoy this moment with Rori when there's so much tragedy and chaos surrounding us? How can I dare to feel anything but grief when Duncan and my brothers are dead?

I begin to shift uneasily, causing Rori to rise to her feet. She stretches like a cat and yawns.

Maker's Breath!
What? No! No, I'm not ogling her... err... I just admire her... blouse. That's a real nice blouse she's wearing. Blue and white stripes, red ties... I'm still lost in the admiration of her... garment, when Rori turns and walks a few steps towards a wooden staircase leading down to the beach. Merciful Andraste! She has some really lovely... err... boots. Leather boots and... pants. Yes, she has pants, too. Made of leather. Rather tightly fitting if I may say so.

"Would you take a walk with me?" Rori asks shyly, blushing beautifully. I hurry to close my mouth as I am gaping at her slack-jawed.

Breathe, Alistair, breathe!

Concentrate on the task ahead. Try not to destroy all of Ferelden in the process. Slay the archdemon. End the Blight.

"Alistair?"

"Err.. a walk? Yes, sure. I like walks. Good thing since we've been walking around a lot recently, right? And it seems we will be walking some more soon," I stammer, all flushed as I join her and we walk along the shore together. "I can't think of anything I would enjoy more than a walk every now and then..."

Maker! Here I am putting my foot in my mouth - again! My face is so red it's practically glowing. Thankfully Rori is busy looking for smooth flat stones. For some time we skim stones - well, I skim them. Rori just drops them into the water. I show her how to send them hopping across the surface instead of having them sink right away. I even take her hand to guide her toss. She sticks her tongue out the corner of her mouth, a display of how utterly concentrated she is. Her stones still just plop into the lake.

"Maker! Woman! Not so heavy-handed! It's just a little twist of your wrist..."

PLOP!

PLOP! PLOP! PLOP!

"Stop! You'll have Lake Calenhad filled to the rim with stones before you get one skimmed!" We laugh so hard we almost tumble into the lake together. "And there I thought I was the clumsy one!"

"I am hopeless," Rori giggles breathlessly. The wind tousles her bright red hair, her cheeks are blushed and her dark blue eyes shine brightly.

"You are," I agree, grinning broadly and rather foolishly.

And she did it again! Just when I wallowed in self-pity and wrapped myself up all in gloom and despair, grief and sorrow, Rori came along and POOF! there went all the appropriate emotions to make room for just enjoying life.

"So," Rori begins when we flop in the shade of a willow. "Last time Teagan saw you, you were covered in mud?"

"Nothing much to tell," I admit, lying down with my arms crossed behind my head. "I was nine and my job was to herd the pigs the farmers had brought in before the tourney held in Maric's honour. The pigs were part of the banquet, you see. I am pretty sure the beasts knew the fate awaiting them. Or I was just the worst swineherd ever."

"They ran away?" Rori inquires, plucking a blade of grass to turn it between her fingers.
"They did," I admit gloomily. "All of them. Don't let anybody tell you that pigs are stupid!"

"They outsmarted you?" Rori giggles.

"Don't tell Morrigan!" I groan, blushing violently.

"Wouldn't dream of it! So what did these nasty pigs do?" Rori grins.

"Oh! Stop making fun of me!" I huff.

"Wouldn't dream of it!" Rori giggles and gives me a peck to the cheek. My head feels like exploding with all the blood rushing there to make me blush even harder.

"Err..." I stammer, unable to recall what we were just talking about.

"Pigs, mud, Teagan," Rori prompts.

"Um... Yes... I just find these nasty pigs a nice place with lots of mud and acrons when the mother sow with her piglets takes Orlesian leave. One desperate dive and I land face forward in the mud and all I get hold off is one piglet. It screeches and squirms and suddenly the mother is back. And boy! is she angry. I run, piglet in arms, scramble through the mud, slip, jump back to my feet. Somewhere I lose the piglet but she's still on my heels... next I stumble onto the road, yelling like a stuck pig, and right into Teagan and his men arriving for the tourney. He shoots the sow and goes: What are you doing here, boy? I'm like: Herding pigs, mylord. And Teagan grins: You certainly made a pig's ear out of this, boy."

I chuckle at the memory. Rori's response is a soft snore. She has fallen asleep, lying prone in the grass with her head resting on her arms.

Charming.

Enchanting.

Bewitching.

She is all that and more...

In the afternoon for example she is hopping mad - namely at Isolde when she drags Teagan into the castle to conciliate whatever evil thing is residing there.

"I fled Highever through a tunnel like this," Rori mutters when we crawl through the secret passage Teagan showed us. "Minus the undead," she adds. "And minus the imprisoned mage."

Jowan. Maleficar, assassin and traitor. Now, that's what I'd call a comprehensive application - for an execution. Jowan really did make a pig's ear of, well, everything. And there I thought, I messed up my life. Compared to him I'm a complete success at all levels.

"Bloody blast it! Loghain and his fucking treachery! And then Isolde! How can she be so damn stupid! I knew she wasn't telling the truth!" Rori bites her lower lip thoughtfully as she turns to us, speaking in a hushed whisper. "He sounds sincere, doesn't he? I mean, he did all these terrible things... but... we didn't leave Sten in that cage for what he did."

"That can hardly be compared," the huge Qunari remarks sourly.

"Why not? You murdered a whole family and showed remorse. Now you are here fighting darkspawn... well, undead at the moment. That's certainly more useful than rotting in a cage."
"As a fish stranded by the tide knows the air or a drowning man knows the sea so does a mage know magic," Sten insist. Boy, and there I thought I was tough when it comes to mages. Qunaris make the better templars it seems. I'm already fantasizing about Morrigan, all tied up, on a ship towards Par Vollen...

"But magic can be really useful," Rori points out. "Some of it at least. My mother became very ill when pregnant. Without magic neither she nor I would have survived."

"The weak die. The strong survive. This is only another proof that magic is causing an imbalance."

"I like you, too, Sten. It's such a pleasure to have you here," Rori dead-pans.

"Can you have just a little drowning?" Sten lectures her like a child. "Some things come only in excess. I say kill the mage. He cannot be trusted."

"He doesn't need to die, surely..." I mutter, feeling very uncomfortable when I so know I should pat Sten's shoulder right now and give him thumbs up. Did I mention I would have sucked as a templar?

"Vashedan! Are we going to fight the darkspawn or chat until they get bored and leave?"

"You think it would work? Alistair and I could totally succeed that way," Rori grins, causing Sten to frown his disapproval at her.

"I say this boy could still be of use to us," Morrigan offers her opinion. "But if not then let him go. Why keep him prisoner here?"

"Hey, hey! Let's not forget he's a blood mage!" I exclaim. If that's our only other option, then I am Team Sten. "You cannot just... set a blood mage free!" Unless of course you want to cause havoc and destruction, chaos, death and suffering, the end of the world...

"Better to slay him? Better punish him for his choice? Is that Alistair who speaks or the templar?" Morrigan asks, her eyes squinted.

"I'd say it's common sense." It has to be very, very common when even I get it. "We don't even know the whole story yet."

"He wishes to redeem himself... doesn't everybody deserve that chance?" Leliana says softly. She's like a delicate flower. If I hadn't seen her poke an arrow right in the eye of an undead, pull it out again and shoot the very same arrow at the next walking corpse approaching, I'd say she wouldn't harm a fly.

Rori decides for leaving Jowan where he is for now. No causing trouble but stored for later use. Typical Rori. Practical as always.

"I am here in case you need me," the maleficar says sadly. I have to admit, I feel a bit sorry for him. Maker! Worst templar ever! I really don't know why the Grand Cleric made such a fuss about letting me go. She should have tied a gift bow around my neck when Duncan asked for me and handed me over with a smile and best wishes.

Some undead, the smith's daughter and some more undead later we burst into the court and - Maker! - ain't we lucky Ser Perth and his knights wait in front of the gates because when we enter the great hall we find we do need all assistance we can possibly get.

It's pretty obvious that Connor indeed is the reason for all this mess. Isolde next to him is not the woman anymore I once knew. She is devastated, hanging her head as she watches her son ordering
Teagan around to play the court jester for him. And no, we're not talking about the innocent games uncles and their nephews play. I mean, Teagan is a good sport. Whenever he came to Redcliffe, he would have a little gift for me, give me fencing lessons or even play hide and seek with me as if he for real was my uncle. But here with Connor, Teagan's movements when turning a sumerault and performing his little dance resemble that of a puppet on a string. Same with Connor. His face is a frozen grimace, a wide grin forced upon it as he claps his hands and rejoices.

"Creepy," Rori and I breathe in unison. She offers a crooked smile and gently squeezes my hand for comfort. Maker knows I do need some reassurance. These people aren't my family. They made it quite clear. But they are closest to what I still got left now Duncan is dead.

"So these are our visitors. The ones you told me about, Mother?" the thing that once was Connor sneers in a voice so alien it chills me to the bone.

"Y-yes, Connor," Isolde whispers, her voice choked by fear.

"And this is the one who defeated my soldiers?" The Connor-thing scowls at Rori. "The ones I sent to reclaim my village?"

"Bloody blast it," Rori groans next to me. "Isn't a poisoned Arl enough trouble?"

"Now it's staring at me. What is it, Mother? I can't see it well enough."

"This... this is a woman, Connor. Just as I am..."

"You lie! This woman is nothing at all like you! Why, just look at her! Half your age and pretty, too. I'm surprised you don't order her executed in a fit of jealousy..."

"Either this is a very very bad example of parenting gone wrong or the boy is possessed," Rori observes.

"Connor! I beg you! Please don't hurt anyone!" Isolde cries in utter despair.

I don't want to admit it but the boy is an abomination. And as far as I recall there's only one way to end this. I feel sick to my stomach, unable to condemn the boy to death, although he is lost already. There is nothing left of him anymore...

"M-mother? What's happening? Where am I?" And suddenly for a heartbeat, he's just Connor, an innocent little boy... and POOF! there he's gone again and the monster is back.

Maker's Breath! But he is still there! I am so shocked by the realization that the boy is still conscious inside his body that he shares with the demon that I hardly pay attention to the conversation between him and Rori. Whatever it is about, it ends in us fighting the Arl's soldiers... and Teagan.

Doom!

DOOM!

"Merciful Andraste! Teagan! Come to your senses!" I try not to hurt him but that's not easy when he hacks at me with his sword mercilessly, grinning like a rampant lunatic. I manage to block most of his blows but I find myself standing with the back against the wall soon. Now it's either him or me... and that's when Teagan is distracted by an apple hitting the side of his head. He turns, moving like pulled around by strings, and finds himself face to face with Rori. Well, face to chest. She's rather small. Teagan wields his sword and Rori just takes one step forward, rams her knee between his legs and slams the hilt of her sword against his temple when the bann sinks to his knees, clutching his
crotch.

OWWWWNNNWW!!!

I so suffer with him, I clutch my own crotch.

"RORI!"

"What? Down and out but alive and still kicking..."

"Could you please stop talking about kicking!"

When Teagan wakes, he's back to normal - although he walks funnily. Storing Jowan proves to be a good decision since he offers a solution that could help Connor. I don't like it. Not one bit. It involves blood magic and a sacrifice. Isolde immediately volunteers. That's the love of a mother I never knew. I... cannot really blame her for what she did when she did it to protect her child. Still...

"Blood magic. How can more evil be of any help here?" I interrupt. "Two wrongs don't make a right."

"It does seem like a sensible choice," Morrigan says.

Sensible my ass!

"And we do have a willing participant," the witch goes on.

I want to tell her that she must have lost her marbles - all of them - when Rori goes: "Okay, so many mages and lyrium could get this done as well, right? How about we go and get some then?"

Maker bless that girl!
"So why are we doing this?" Morrigan isn't happy with Rori's decision. I am. Very happy indeed. I could kiss her just for that one decision - and for a whole lot of other reasons. If I ever dare to be that bold.

"Because it's the right thing to do. If we can save Connor we should give it a try. And it's not as if we're wasting time. We have to see the mages anyway." Rori explains for the umpteenth time.

"I agree. Just one question that's been bothering me," I interrupt their little quarrel. "There will be templars at the Circle of Magi and they will certainly know Morrigan is not one of their Circle mages. How do we explain her presence?"

"If anybody asks, she's a Grey Warden recruit," Rori decides after a moment of consideration.

"We lie to them?" I'm shocked. I mean, they are templars and they protect people from evil magic. Morrigan is evil and does magic. And we lie to them?

"Would you rather have them arrest Morrigan for being an apostate?" Rori seems to have no problems at all with deceiving the templars.

"Is that a question that requires an answer?" I ask. The prospect of getting rid of Morrigan... now, that's really something to look forward to.

"I so hate you," Morrigan hisses.

We set up camp close to the lake since we are all too tired to walk any further. I don't want to rest until we find help for Connor but in the end I have to give in when Rori almost collapses on the road. It has been a hard night and we didn't get any rest after the fight against the undead but went straight to Eamon's castle.

Rori has tried to organize some horses for us but failed. All horses in Arl Eamon's stables are dead. The stench was so horrible we both almost vomited before we even got to open the door. Whatever happened to the horses - it wasn't pretty. Not at all. Master Dennet so won't like this.

"And you think the demon will be a good demon and wait for our return before it tries to kill some more villagers," Morrigan snorts.

"I thought you didn't care about the silly villagers?" Rori is completely unimpressed by Morrigan's attitude. Or she is too tired to care. She doesn't even bother with her tent. She's asleep as soon as her head touches the ground. I put her tent up for her and carry her inside. To sleep in your armour is a very bad idea. You'll be sore for days. This is not just a lame excuse why I undress Rori. Her armour only of course. Barkley is watching me suspiciously so there's no chance I would make a wrong move.

I pull off her boots and chuckle when I see she wears rainbow coloured striped socks. She doesn't wake up when I make her sit to shed her out of her leather armour. Her head drops against my shoulder and she instinctively snuggles closer. I sit there, not daring to move. I don't WANT to move. I hold a half-naked girl snuggled to my chest and it's not just any girl but it's Rori. Her hair tickles my chin and I bury my nose in the softness of her strands, inhaling the scent of verbena. We are all unwashed and dirty, still this scent lingers on her.

Boy, I am so thankful I dared to ask Sten to help me with my armour earlier. This feeling of her
warm body so close to mine, the softness of her skin against my palm where my hand rests on her thigh, it's a whole new experience. And it's so damn hot. Yeah, you laugh! But I grew up in a monastery.

Rori stirs in my arms, nuzzling the crook of my neck as she does so. She mumbles softly in her sleep. It's hardly audible, a whisper against my bare skin and still it has shivers run down my spine.
"Alistair..."

I'm bewitched.

Until Morrigan pokes her head through the entrance and glares at me. "What are you doing in here, you sneaky deviant?"

"That's none of your business," I snarl. The spell is broken. I put Rori down and wrap her into her blanket. Barkley drops down next to her and the way he growls leaves no room for interpretation. I'm being dismissed.

"I do wonder. Is it permissible for two Grey Wardens to... oh, what is the word I search for?" Morrigan remarks when I crawl out of Rori's tent.

"Canoodle?" I offer against my better judgement.

"Fraternize." Morrigan corrects me.

"What's wrong with fraternizing?" I wonder.

"It seems most undisciplined, for an organization that claims it will do whatever is necessary to end the darkspawn threat."

"One thing has nothing to do with the other." Really, what is her problem? Rori and I, we're a team, right? We work together quite well even after such short a time. That I... uhm... like her... a bit... okay, a lot... that doesn't change a thing, does it?

"Oh no? And what if a Grey Warden was forced to choose between the Warden he loved and ending the Blight? What should his choice be?" Morrigan asks nonchalantly, arching one eyebrow as she looks at me quizzically.

"That is a... a ridiculous question," I snort, angry with myself that her question bothers me at all. It's a really ridiculous and stupid question! The Blight would destroy everybody and everything. What kind of choice would that be?

"And I have my answer. Most kind of you."

Could she crawl into a bush and die? That would be great. But of course she doesn't! Instead after a moment of silent contemplation, the nasty witch goes: "There is one thing I do not understand, Alistair."

"Just the one thing?" I could name a thousand things she doesn't understand from A like altruism to Z like zeal.

"About you, perhaps. Why the deception over your parentage?" Morrigan stays completely unperturbed by the fact that I turn my back on her and begin to put up my own tent.
"I'd figure you'd be the sort who knows all about deception," I mutter. I really don't want to talk about this.

"I do. And what use the deception might have had ended when King Cailan perished, did it not?" Morrigan saunters past me, watching me struggle with the tent.

"Maybe. I guess I was sort of hoping that would go away." Like I am sort of hoping Morrigan would go away. Just such things never happen.

"The truth does not 'go away'." Morrigan snorts.

"I didn't say it was a good plan," I snap. I could try to explain but why make the effort when she's unable to understand?

"Unsurprisingly," Morrigan observes. finally leaving me alone.

What to do with the rest of the night? I don't feel tired at all. Maybe I should go and strangle Morrigan. Now wouldn't that be fun?

Instead I lie in my tent and toss and turn, unable to sleep. My thoughts keep returning to Rori, the sensation of her body so close to mine, the softness of her skin and hair, her intoxicating scent. It's thrilling in a way that causes my body to react. I haven't even kissed her. I don't know if she cares for me - not for sure - but here I am lying in my tent with a major hard on when thinking about her.

It's tempting to allow myself to get lost in my fantasies and seek satisfaction by my own hands. But it doesn't feel right. It feels like defiling her. Rori becomes more precious to me with every day passing. She's not just some sexual object I'd think about when jerking off.

So I lie there in the dark and suffer and try to think about something that would totally turn me off. There's a whole lot unpleasant things on my mind. With all the events that have happened I don't run out of them - but in the end it's thinking about Morrigan that puts an end to my sexual tension. I so wish she'd put on some clothes so that I didn't have to watch her breasts swing when she walks. It's not as if I watch deliberately - just try not to stare at a woman's breasts when she hardly bothers to cover them. It's impossible!

The more I think about Morrigan the less I believe I will be able to have another erection for the rest of my life.

Eventually I fall asleep and only wake when dawn breaks. Sten hasn't woken me for my watch. He still sits at the campfire when I sleepily crawl out of my tent. He looks as if he's asleep but he is not. I don't know how he does it. It's some kind of meditation and it allows him to go without sleep far longer than the rest of us.

I take my backpack and search for a place at the shore of the lake that provides some privacy. Barkley has eaten my soap. That dog devours anything he can get. Rori gave me one of her verbena scented bars instead. The scent brings back memories of last night. I wash, enjoying that I am wrapped up in Rori's scent now. Then I prepare for my shaving ritual. Templars have to be very disciplined. At least they should be. I don't claim to be an outstanding example. Anyway, rituals in our daily routine help us to be disciplined. One of my rituals is my daily shaving.

I do it every morning if possible. If I don't then we are either in the middle of a fight or surrounded by darkspawn or dead.

First I lay out my utensils. My razor, my shaving brush, the soap and the small mirror shard. I carefully soap my face and arrange the mirror on a rock. But this time the mirror slips and shatters
when hitting the ground.

Blast it! I curse under my breath. Now here I am with my face covered with soap and my mirror gone. I figure I will have to wash my face and get going without my morning routine. I hate it when this routine gets disturbed.

"I can do it for you." Rori's voice startles me. I almost cut myself with the razor blade. How long has she been standing there?

She looks like she has just crawled out of her tent. Her hair is a tousled mess. She only wears her shirt and her rainbow coloured striped socks, wet with dew. She didn't bother to put on boots but she brought her swords.

I am very well aware of how her eyes rake over my shirtless torso. Yep, I am a handsome bastard. She knows and so do I.

I hand her the razor. "Try not to cut my throat."

"And deal with the Blight all alone?" The way she holds the razor I can tell she knows what she's about to do. "Please take a seat, Ser." She motions for me to sit on the rock and I hurry to obey. She tests the sharpness of the blade, then sets to work. The blade glides across my skin smoothly. There's neither too much pressure, nor are her movements hesitant. I let out a sigh of relief. I haven't even noticed I was holding my breath.

Rori grins. "Afraid I could hurt you?"

"I wouldn't have given you that razor if I was."

She picks up a towel and wipes the last remains of soap from my face. Then her fingertips whisper across my skin. It sends a shiver down my spine. "Here, you go. As smooth as a baby butt."

"Are you calling me a butt head?"

"No, but a baby face." And then she bends down to kiss my cheek. Her lips only brush across my skin and still the softness of her touch burns into my heart. I am still gawking when she walks down to the shore. She takes off her socks and wades into the water without taking her shirt off. Ha! I wash my clothes the same way. Although it could also be part of me watching her why she wouldn't...

She turns to see me standing there like the fool I am. "Alistair."

"Rori."

"Are you going to stand there and watch me taking a bath?"

"As much as I'd love to I doubt I'd get away with such a close shave next time if I did."

"Smart boy. Now make yourself useful and make coffee."

"Your desire is my command."
"And this all sounded so easy when we left Redcliffe," Rori sighs once the doors slam shut behind us. She peers down the dim and empty corridor. It's as silent in here as in a grave. "Go find some mages and lyrium and have them save Connor."

"As I recall from my time as a templar, locking the door and throwing away the key was 'plan B'." I whisper next to her.

"If this is meant to reassure me, then I am afraid it doesn't work," Rori comments as she carefully proceeds down the corridor.

What we find is a mess. A huge and horrible, bloody blasted mess. Well, first we find a granny mage called Wynne but right after that it's all but a huge mess. Something has happened in this tower, something really evil. Demons, abominations, templars and mages either possessed or dead and a corruption that has spread all over the place, something fleshy and smelly that none of us longs to touch. Even Morrigan is uncharacteristically silent.

And then when I really think it can't get worse we meet that sloth demon. It looks like a huge mass of misshapen flesh as if someone had mashed meat together in an utterly disgusting way and the result came alive somehow. And before I even know what's happening, I'm drifting off to sleep. Last thing I hear is Morrigan complaining: "This is ridiculous. You cannot expect me to rest on a floor sticky with blood!"

"Alistair!" Goldanna beams at me when she opens the door. "It is so good to see you! I've waited for this for years. Oh, little brother, how I missed you!" She hugs me tight, making me blush as I feel so overwhelmed by her welcome. Before I can even stammer a greeting, she drags me into her house and introduces me to my nephews and nieces.

And I really have thought that being a Grey Warden would make me happy! All the death, the tragedy, the horrendous nightmares and the darkspawn. All that seems so far away now that the Blight is over and I have found the home that I have always longed for.

The only thing that's bothering me is Rori's absence. I wonder what happened to her after the archdemon got defeated. I really have to ask Goldanna about her. Strange that I cannot remember myself...

"Alistair, can you lay the table, please?" Goldanna calls from the kitchen, disturbing my confused thoughts.

And then all of a sudden Rori is there. She walks through the door of Goldanna's house as if she has been invited. And there I thought things couldn't get more perfect...

"Hey Rori! It's great to see you again. I was just thinking about you. Isn't that a marvellous coincidence?" I take her hand and introduce her to my sister and the kids. "We're one happy family, at long last!" I beam at her, earning myself a frown in return. I admit, I'm a little disappointed. I thought... oh, I don't know...

"You... seem very content." Rori mutters compasionately. She's acting strange.

"I am! I'm happier than I've been my entire life. Isn't this strange? I thought being a Grey Warden would make me happy. I was wrong. This is it."
"Oh Alistair!" Rori gives me a hug. Not the nice-to-see-you-again kind of hug, more the I'm-so-sorry type. "Sorry, but you can't stay. We have to go."

What? She has to be kidding. I'm done with this. One Blight is enough. "Okay, listen, I really like you but I don't think I'll come along. I don't want to spend my life fighting only to end next to rotting darkspawn."

"My sentiments exactly," Rori agrees. "I really wish it was because you deserve to be happy, but... this is not real. At least you got a cool dream! Mine sucked. But it still is only an illusion."

What in the name of the Maker is she talking about? "Alistair," Rori says insistently as she takes my hands. Her touch doesn't seem... real... Something is odd here. "Try to remember how you came here. What happened right before you came here?"

"We defeated the archdemon..."

"And how exactly did we do that?" Rori inquires rather curiously.

"Uhm... I don't know... I don't remember... that's strange..."

"And there I thought all this trouble could turn out as useful after all," Rori sighs. "Listen, Alistair, I don't know much about this. Actually nothing. But I think this is the Fade," Rori explains hastily. "It can't be anything else."

"The Fade?" I echo stupidly. But then... all this wouldn't be true. Goldanna, my family, this would be a lie.

"You have absolutely no idea what I had to do to get here to find you," Rori groans. She looks shaken. "And I will not leave without you." Stubborn as always. Just... I do not want to leave... can't she stay instead?

I look around at Goldanna standing at the stove, and the children playing tag, running around the large table in the kitchen. "This... is not real?"

"I am sorry, Alistair," Rori whispers softly, squeezing my hand.

"We've been at the Circle of Magi... there..." I force the memory to the surface. It seems so far away and still... it is the only thing real next to Rori. The moment I accept this, the world around me changes. The house vanishes and I find myself standing in a deserted landscape that floats in the middle of nowhere. Goldanna shrieks and throws herself at me. "I rather kill him if I can't have him!"

I am so startled, I just stand there and stare. This... thing... still wears my sister's face and although I know it is not her, I just cannot move to defend myself. Only when Rori runs the false Goldanna through and... whatever it is... begins to pull itself off the blade while hissing and shrieking in a most unhuman way, I jump into action.

"I cannot believe I got fooled so easily..." I mumble once the illusion is shattered and the creatures are dead. Rori opens her mouth to answer but I cannot hear her. She seems to dissolve - or maybe that's me...

An epic fight later I pick myself from the greasy floor in the tower at Kinloch Hold. I have a major headache and feel like a complete idiot. I guess, I by now should have gotten used to that feeling.

"Okay, let's get this done - quickly," Rori says firmly, carefully retrieving the book Niall mentioned from his body. "I do not want to experience anything like that ever again!"
We have to be almost at the top of that blasted tower. Another staircase opens into a small hall with something shimmering at the far end. It looks like a transparent wall with a figure crouching behind.

"Is there someone over there?" Leliana peers through the open door at the end of the staircase that leads us towards the top of the tower. "Oh, I hope they're still alive."

"It's a templar!" Wynne gasps as we draw closer. "He... he's still alive, I think! We must help him!" She wants to dart forward but Rori stops her.

"Careful," she whispers, slowing down our approach as she urges us to look around for anything odd. Well, more odd than a templar trapped behind a magical wall.

Sten rubs his chin in thought. "They spared one. Curious."

"Twould seem we are not the only ones these demons enjoy tormenting" Morrigan observes without any sympathy.

"Watch, now. I'm not falling asleep again!" I grumble. "This could be some trick. We should be careful."

I am not the only one to be wary and tired of mind games. "This trick again?" the templar groans as he catches sight of us. He is a young fellow about my age. "I know what you are. It won't work. I will stay strong."

"He really is a templar," Rori observes, sounding quite surprised there should be one left alive. All those we saw were either dead or possessed or mind controlled. To meet another demon would have been more likely. "He is a prisoner. Why would they do such a thing?"

"The boy is exhausted," Wynne says with much sympathy. "And this cage... I've never seen anything like it." She reaches out to touch the shimmering wall but flinches before her hand makes the contact. Instead she turns towards the poor templar, talking to him in a soothing fashion as if he was a frightened child. "Rest easy. Help is here."

He groans, almost sobs in response and drops down on his knees, clutching his head as if in great pain. "Enough visions. If anything in you is human... kill me now and stop this game."

"He's delirious. He's been tortured and has probably been denied food and water. I can tell. Here, I have a skin of..." Leliana comes forward to help the poor man but he snarls at her.

"Don't touch me! Stay away! Filthy bloodmages getting in my head. I. Will. Not. Break. I'd rather die."

"Calm down, you're save now... or will be soon when we're done with the filthy bloodmages you mentioned," Rori tries to soothe him.

The templar jumps back to his feet in desperate anger. "Silence! I won't listen to anything you say! Now, be gone!" He closes his eyes and when he opens them again finds us all still standing there. "Still here? But that has always worked before! I close my eyes but you are still here when I open them!"

"Boy, they really messed around with your mind," Rori mumbles, her eyes full of concern as she watches the young man despair. She steps closer and he retreats. "Hush, it's alright. I am no illusion. None of us is. What's your name?" she speaks to him softly.

"My name?" Now the templar is even more confused than before. "I am not telling you my name,
"Alright. Then I start. I am Rori Elissa Cousland of Highever. Pleased to meet you... although the circumstances aren't exactly pleasant."

You can see it in his eyes, the way his face twists, that it slowly begins to dawn on him that we are indeed real and no demons or bloodmages. Neither demons nor bloodmages probably ever introduce themselves with their full name. "My name is Cullen Stanton Rutherford," he replies in a hoarse whisper as if he has to remind himself of his own name, as if saying it out loud makes it more real.

"Listen, Cullen," Rori keeps his attention on her by using his name. It's also a reassurance and calms him down for the moment. "We cannot get you out of this... cage... right now... but I do promise we will come back and help you. Just hold on for a bit longer, will you? We have cleared the tower so far, so there should be no more bloodmages or demons anywhere below... We've been rather... efficient. Can you tell us where the other mages are?"

"What others? What are you talking about?" Cullen cries out.

"Irving and the other mages that fought Uldred - where are they?" Wynne asks calmly. There's no use to get impatient with Cullen, she knows. We all do. Even Morrigan doesn't make any smug remarks.

"They are in the Harrowing Chamber. The sounds coming out from there... Oh Maker!" Cullen is close to crying. He's trembling so badly, I fear he's going to break down anytime soon.

"We must hurry!" Wynne exclaims. "They are in great danger, I am sure of it."

"No doubt they are after what we have already found on our way up here," Rori agrees.

"You can't save them!" Cullen shouts, clearly agonized. "You don't know what they become!"

"Uhm... and you do?"

"They've been surrounded by bloodmages whose wicked fingers snake into your mind and corrupt your thoughts." Cullen closes his eyes in anguish. "You have to end it now before it's too late."

"Cullen... you have been surrounded by bloodmages, too..." Rori points out. That their wicked fingers have been busy with his mind is quite obvious. Still, he resisted. "What do you purpose we do?"

"To ensure this horror is ended, to guarantee that no abominations or bloodmages live, you must kill everyone up there."

"Wow." Rori says, then silently considers his request for a moment. "Alistair, you have been a templar... do you agree with Cullen?"

Whoa! Is she really asking for my opinion? Now? I begin to sweat. Whatever I say now can come down to a decision of life or death. "I... I don't know," I stammer, wringing my hands nervously. "It's been an awful mess until now... but... there were some if only a few we could save... and we don't even know what's happening up there..."

"The more time we waste the less they have a chance to survive," Wynne points out. "To kill them all at once without making sure they have been corrupted... can we really do that?"

Biting her lips, Rori looks from Cullen to Wynne and me. I really don't want to walk in her shoes...
right now. Actually, I never want to walk in her shoes. They'd be too small for me anyway... "I
cannot make that decision before I know what's happening," Rori informs Cullen.

"That is your choice to make but I beg you to consider what I have to say. You cannot tell
maleficarum by sight."

"That's true," I agree. Unfortunately they don't run around with signs around their necks, telling you
what they are. And they don't necessarily look evil. We've been taught that during templar training.
The most beautiful woman, the sweetest child, the fragile grandmother - they all could be
maleficarum.

Life would be so much easier if they all sprouted horns or hooves. Wings wouldn't be that good
because then they could fly away... But as maleficarum do nothing of this, they tell templars not to be
deceived by looks or manners, to be always alert, always watchful. Paranoia is a common disease
amongst templars.

"Just one could influence the mind of a king, of a Grand Cleric..." Cullen breathes, horrified by the
mere thought.

"Good thing we neither have a king here nor a Grand Cleric. Only a royal bastard...," Rori mumbles.
I glare at her and earn myself a sheepish grin and an apologetic shrug.

"A bit of mind control wouldn't hurt with him." Morrigan sneers. "He couldn't turn out any dumber.
Maybe it even would make an improvement."

Hey!

"What?" Cullen stares at her in confusion.

"Never mind," Morrigan hurries to say.

"We will save as many as we can," Rori decides.

"I am in no position to influence your decision," Cullen defeatedly observes. "Nobody ever listens
until it is too late!" he cries out. "Maker turn his gaze on you. I hope your compassion hasn't doomed
us all."

"I hope so, too," Rori agrees. She inhales deeply, then marches off to climb the very last staircase
and kick the door open that leads into the Harrowing Chamber.

This has been fucked up before - now, this is the epitome of evilness. And stupidity according to
Morrigan. We all stand there and watch Uldred morph from a bald unpleasant man to an even more
unpleasant monster.

"Bloody blast it!" Rori hisses. "Let's go and kick its ass back to where it came from!"

...

I'm feeling a little dizzy. Too many mages in one place have that effect on me. Wynne is a nice old
woman, though. She's so grandmotherly. Still, cleaning the tower was tough. Rori has been silent
ever since we got back into the boat that ships us back to the shore. She's worried about poor Cullen.
He insisted to walk all the way down on his own because he didn't trust us. We all feared he would
fall down the stairs and break his neck. He was in such an awful condition. It is late at night and
although Irving and Knight-Commander Gregoir offered us to stay, both Rori and I exclaimed an
unison "NO!" - well, she said something like "Thank you, but no, thank you." My politness got lost
somewhere in between level two and three of that blasted tower.

I jump out of the boat first and hold out my hand for the ladies to take. Rori probably could sumersault out of that boat. Still, I like to pretend to be a gentleman. And I like the feeling of her small hand in mine. Morrigan swats my hand away - and almost falls into the lake when her sudden movement causes the boat to totter.

"We could stay at the inn?" Wynne suggests. She's as tired as the rest of us, maybe more. I mean, she's old. She herds us all together like a mother goose and we trudge behind her. Soon we sit at one of the tables in the inn, plates with food piling up in front of us. Rori pecks at her food. That's so unlike her that I get worried.

"Are you alright?"

"Huh? Yes, I am, thank you." Sighing she puts down her fork. "I've never met any bloodmages before. Or demons. Or abominations. Actually... there has been a great lack of monsters in my life before Duncan recruited me. And now... they are everywhere!"

"Despite your lack of experience with monsters you're doing extremely well," I observe.

"Hmph!"

"You were the only one who didn't buy the sloth demon's illusion." I still feel like a complete loser for having been fooled that easily. At least Wynne got wrapped up in the illusion as well - and she is a mage. I always thought it easier for mages to see through such illusions.

"Eww, the Fade. Don't you remind me of that. I had to shapeshift into a mouse and other things and... it was all totally and completely strange!" Rori pierces what is supposed to be a potato with her fork and nibbles it listlessly. I am really tempted to ask about the mouse thing but the way she shudders when she talks about the Fade stops me. "Still, seeing through the illusion... that was nothing big. Sten and Morrigan didn't get fooled either."

"But you managed to escape. I would have died in there like Niall without you. We all would have died. Uldred would have succeeded and Greagoir would have used the Right of Annulment to kill all remaining mages in the Circle."

"The sloth demon made a mistake, that's all. The illusion wasn't well chosen. I knew it was wrong."

"What did he show you?" Wynne asks with obvious interest.

Rori chews at her lower lip for a while. "Duncan," she finally says tiredly. "He had me meet Duncan in Weishaupt. I knew Duncan was dead. So this couldn't be real. I still wonder why he chose him out of all the people he must have found in my memory. He could have trapped me in an illusion of my home with Mother and Father still alive. Even could have made me defend them forever. And if it had to be Weishaupt... why Duncan? Why not... Alistair?" Our eyes meet when she says my name. There's something in the way she looks at me next to her confusion and exhaustion, something beyond the sorrow. Would she not have seen through the illusion if it had been me she met there? And why not? Because I am alive and she'd not have guessed this had to be wrong? Or because she wanted to be there because of me... with me... like I felt at home with the false Goldanna because I so wanted this to be true. I asked Rori if I could pay my sister a visit as soon as we reach Denerim. She agreed - but now I am even more nervous than before. The sloth demon showed me what I look for in my sister. What if reality is not as wonderful as the lie?

The rooms in the inn are crowded with travellers and refugees from the south. So no real bed for us.
We are allowed to sleep in the stables, though and it's still better than a tent. Rori lies next to me in the hay with Barkley at her side. I have trouble falling asleep. Next to being bothered by the incident at the tower, I am worried about Connor and Arl Eamon. It's been some days now since we left them. I do hope they can keep the demon under control. If not...

See, that's why I don't want to be the one to make decisions. If the demon regained control over Connor in a way that makes it attack the villagers, then there will be more dead. If we killed Connor right away we could have avoided that risk. Same if we allowed Isolde to sacrifice herself. But Rori did none of that. She took the risk and if things go wrong it will be her responsibility. She will be the one to have chosen that path, the one who will have to deal with the results of her decisions.

Am I a coward? Yes, I'd say so. In battle I am not. To risk my own life has never bothered me. If I die, then that's fate. If I can save some with my own death, that's a good thing. But to decide who should live and who should die. Decisions as huge as Rori has to make them, that's nothing I can handle. I wonder how she does.

I lie on my back, staring at the ceiling in the dark. Rori lies beside me. Her breathing has become ragged and she is tossing and turning. Another nightmare. I only have to reach out to touch her and shake her awake gently. She sits up startled, trying to get away from me, shaking my hand off her shoulder.

"Hush," I soothe her. "It was only a nightmare."

"Alistair?" She sounds so timid and lost. I feel her fingertips whisper across my face when she tries to find me in the darkness.

"At your service."

"Don't you have nightmares? Shouldn't we have the same?" Her voice is no more than a low murmur in the darkness.

"I couldn't sleep. And I guess after some time you get used to it. Often the dreams are the same or similar. It also depends on how long you have been a Grey Warden."

"Because the poison has been in your blood longer?"

"Probably."

"What changes about you after the Joining?" The hay rustles when she inches closer until we lie face to face.

"Other than you become a Grey Warden?"

"I mean physically." She stifles a yawn.

"You know, I asked Duncan this, too, and all I got was 'You'll see.'"

Rori snorts. "Just try that line on me."

"I have other lines for you, trust me." I chuckle softly.

Another snort, but I can also hear her smile.

"It's not that Duncan wants to keep it a secret. It's just that the Grey Wardens don't discuss it much." Usually there should be at least one to help you through whatever changes you experience. Just the
two of us are unlucky, so that makes me the senior clueless fool and her my apprentice. In case we survive this and actually get to rebuild the Grey Wardens, this is top on my list of things I'd like to change. Every new Warden will get a thorough tutorial.

"You will have to discuss it with me, though." Stubborn little girl. I'd love to have seen her squeeze the info out of Duncan. She doesn't have to press me too hard. I'd give her anything she wants.

"The first change I noticed was an increasing appetite. I used to get up in the middle of the night and raid the castle larder. I thought I was starving. I'd slurp down every dinner like it was my last, my face all covered in gravy. When I'd look up the other Grey Wardens would stare then laugh themselves to tears."

"I haven't felt anything like that." Rori muses.

"Really? Because I was watching you wolf down food the other day and I thought: Uh, it's a good thing she gets a lot of exercise."

"What can I say, I'm a growing girl." I can't see her grin but she for sure does. One of these wide and a little foolish grins that make her look like a little girl who got caught stealing cookies.

"I'll say!"

"Hey!" She punches me in the chest.

"Ugh, I didn't mean it like that. No, don't hit me, I bruise easily."

"Sometimes you're such a jerk!"

"I cannot be perfect all the time."

Then there's the nightmares. But she already knows about them. What nobody ever told her was the part when the nightmares become real bad. To be a Grey Warden is a death sentence. It is very unlikely one of us will die in bed of senile decay.

"First I have to survive the Blight and Loghain's tries to murder me, then I can start worrying about the Calling." Rori and her pragmatism. She falls silent for some time and I know she's biting her lower lip while lost in thought. "I don't get why Loghain does this. Cailan's death was planned as was the murder of my family. He tried to overtake the mages, too. And poison Eamon. Why? He was one of Maric's best friends. He was a hero. What has changed that?"

"Lunacy?"

"That's a rather simple explanation and I don't buy it."

"Well, I might hold myself back long enough for you to ask him before I kill him." I don't really care for the why. Those things he did and does, there's nothing that could convince me he doesn't deserve to die.

"Alistair? Are you sleeping?" Rori asks after a moment of silence,

"Sleeping like a log," I chuckle.

"Your Fade dream... do you regret leaving it? You were happy there, weren't you? Like the templar was happy in the illusion the desire demon created for him."

"Well, I couldn't let you end the Blight all on your own, right? Why? Did you consider leaving me
there?" I'm not sure how I feel. Worried about my meeting with the real Goldanna. Disappointed because once again a dream burst like a soap bubble. Sad because the Grey Wardens don't feel like home anymore. Still, would I have wanted to stay?

"No." Rori's answer comes without hesitation. "It was an illusion and although it made you happy, this happiness was false. Leaving you there would have robbed you off the chance to find true happiness in your real life."

Now that's Rori to a T. Always an optimist. I'm not as positive about my future. That's when she squeezes my hand reassuringly and I can hear her smile. Maybe happiness is not that far away after all.
Alistair's Rose

Connor is alive and the demon gone. I cannot express my gratitude, my vocabulary lacks the words to even get close to tell Rori how thankful I am. Sure, we still have to find a way to heal Arl Eamon but after what she did for Connor I’m pretty sure she will succeed in rescuing the Arl. Not to mention all the blood mages and demons we killed when we cleared the tower for the templars. And all those we saved including Irving and Cullen. Add our vacancies in the Fade - yes, we've been rather busy. That probably explains why Rori gets so excited when Teagan invites us to stay at the castle for the night.

"A bed! A real bed!" Rori throws herself onto the mattress and hugs the pillow like she has never seen one before. "I am not going to get out of bed before we have to leave tomorrow. Can anybody tell the servants I will eat in my room?" Rori declares, her face buried in the pillow. "Oh wait, I will get out of bed for a hot bath. Hot bath.... awww, that sounds nice. No icy rivers, lakes, ponds. Steaming hot water with foam bubbles." She kicks off her boots and crawls under the blanket, pulling it over her head.

I stand at the door, watching her with growing amusement. When she doesn't reappear, I clear my throat to announce my presence. "Rori?"

"The person you have called is temporarily not available." A muffled voice answers from under the blanket.

"I have to talk to you."

"Does that mean I have to get out of bed?"

"Uhm, no."

"Then you may speak."

"Do I have to speak to the blanket or will you show me your lovely face?"

Rori crawls out of her blanket cave but she still refuses to get out of bed. "Don't even try to make me get up, Prince Charming. I won't. No way."

"And there I thought it was my part to get you into bed instead of out of it."

"You shouldn't worry about getting me into bed. Getting you in beside me is the tricky part of your mission."

"So that's my mission then, right?"

"You tell me."

"Oh, maybe I will. But not now. I came here because I want to thank you for what you did for Connor. It means a lot to me." Arl Eamon is almost family and so are his son and wife - even after she made Eamon send me away when I was a child I hold no grudge against her. Not anymore. Rori could have taken the easy way but she didn't. I will never forget that. "That's what I wanted to say," I end when my little speech is over. "Now I will leave you alone to enjoy your bed."

"Alistair," she calls when I turn to leave. She pats the mattress, prompting me to take a seat.
"So, getting into bed with you already?" I tease. I don't receive an answer but when I sit next to her she takes my hand and turns my palm upside. Then she gently places an amulet in it. I stare at it for a while uncomprehendingly. It is a symbol of Andraste. Many cracks and lines have marred the surface. I look up at Rori, her gaze wide and expectant, then back at the amulet.

"This... is my mother's amulet. Where do you find it? Why isn't it broken?"

"Here in Redcliffe, in the study."

"Oh? The Arl's study? Then he must have found it after I threw it at the wall. He repaired it, kept it. I can't understand. Why would he do that?"

"Maybe he cared for you more than you thought."

"Thank you. I mean it. I thought I'd lost it to my own stupidity. I need to talk to the Arl about it after he recovers... when he recovers."

"Of course he will. We'll find the ashes and everything will be alright." I wish I had her confidence. She makes this sound like a Sunday afternoon stroll in the park. She smiles so brightly I almost believe she's happier than I am about the recovery of my mother's amulet. And that would mean she's happy because I am.

"I'm so glad it's not lost. But don't thank me, thank the Arl. He put it back together. I just saw it lying there on his desk and figured it could be yours."

"You remembered me mentioning it? Wow. I'm more used to people not really listening when I go on about things."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

Haha! Yeah, that's more like it should be. Rori hits me with her pillow when I wave my hands in front of her face. "Hello?! Do you hear me?"

"I do. Now get out of here. I want to take a nap. Maybe this time the nightmares give me a break."

I close the door behind me as silently as possible. That also means closing it slowly and that means I can glimpse at Rori through the crack of the door far longer. There's a tugging in my heart, a longing that I have never felt before.

It's quite clear: At this point I need some advice.

I have never actually wooed a woman. But that's what I will have to do now. Either woo her or admire her from afar and die from a desire never satisfied. And no, it's not what you think! I didn't mean it like that.

See, that's the reason why some advice isn't a bad idea.

Right next to Rori's room is Leliana's. She almost collides with me when she comes bursting out of her door, humming cheerfully to herself.

"Alistair! Isn't it NICE that Bann Teagan allows us to stay? I will sing tonight for our hosts. I am so excited. See that dress Isolde allowed me to borrow?"

"Nice," I mumble when she pirouettes. It's certainly a pretty dress, lime green silk with a silver floral pattern at the hem and silver birds in silver trees on the belt around her waist. Leliana feels
encouraged enough by my reply to show me her shoes as well.

"And look at these boots! Lady Isolde has such a good taste. You can tell she's from Orlais only by looking at her wardrobe." Dark green boots with heels so high I wonder how she can actually walk in them without breaking her ankle. The boots have silver buckles and quillings. It's far too exaggerated for my taste. Leliana sighs blissfully. "Sometimes a girl just wants to have pretty feet. In Orlais I had more shoes than you can ever imagine. All sorts of forms and colours. Boots and bootees, sandals and..."

I have no clue what's the difference between a boot and a bootee and I doubt it will ever be essential knowledge.

How to get her from talking about boots to answer what I want to ask her? "So... you're female, Leliana, right?" I interrupt when she talks about velvet ballerinas - shoes, not dancers.

"I am? That's news. When did that happen?" That's not how I planned this, but at least she has stopped talking about shoes.

I squirm a bit but I guess it's better to endure an embarrassing moment with Leliana than to make a complete fool of myself in front of Rori. "I just wanted some advice. What should I do if... if I think a woman is special and..." Why is this so hard? Everything should be as easy as smashing in a darkspawn skull. Life would be far less complicated that way.

"You want to woo her? Here's a good tip: you shouldn't question her about her female-ness."

Sigh. "All right, yes. Good point."

This is the point where I wish for a hole in the ground to open and swallow me. I want to get away but now Leliana has me on the hook. "Why do you ask? Are you afraid things will not proceed naturally?"

"Why would they? Especially when I do things like ask women if they're female."

"It adds to your charm, Alistair. You are a little awkward. It is endearing." Leliana pinches my cheek and beams at me patronizingly.

"So I should be awkward?" This for sure feels awkward. AWKWARD. In capital letters. "Didn't you just say not to do things like that?"

"Just be yourself. You do know how to do that, don't you?"

"All right, forget I asked."

This having turned out as a complete failure I return to my room and lie on the bed, wondering how I should be myself when being myself always seems to end in a catastrophe. I don't want Rori to think I am awkward. I want her to... I don't know. I'm too confused to think straight. Then it's time to get ready for dinner - including the time for a bath and hunting down a servant to help me find some fresh clothes that don't make me look like a clown. All this finely embroidered silk makes me feel uncomfortable but I also don't want to look like a tramp when attending dinner.

When I rummage in my backpack for some clean underwear I find a small box in between a sample of socks that desperatedly need to be washed. I have almost forgotten about that box. I found it in Lothering after I plucked a single red rose from a dead looking rose bush. I put the blossom into the box and then stuffed it into my backpack where it stayed until today. The flower for sure has died by now. The thought makes me sad as I picked it to not leave it there for the darkspawn to taint it. When
I open the box the rose is as fresh and crimson as it was the day I plucked it.

Surprised I take it out of the box, only then noticing the small traces of powder both in the box and on the flower. Lyrium. I accidentally put the rose into a box that once held the lyrium of maybe a templar. The lyrium must have preserved the flower and prevented it from dying.

I put the flower back into the box and pocket it when the servant calls me for dinner. Teagan and Isolde are already there with Ser Perth when I enter the dining hall. Morrigan has taken place at the far side of the table. She hasn't changed into something less revealing which really is a pity. Sten has folded his long frame onto a chair that looks like kids furniture in comparison to his size. Wynne is chatting with Isolde. She still looks tired and worried but now Connor is save, hope has returned to her. Leliana makes her entry a few moments later, carrying her lute.

Only Rori is missing.

I take it she indeed stays in bed. But then the doors open once more and there she is. I can't help it, my jaw drops open and I gawk until Teagan kicks my shin under the table.

Rori is wearing a powder-blue silk dress with a pale golden embroidered hem and a golden belt around her narrow waist. The only jewelry she wears is a white gold headband of intertwined leaves and flowers. She is breathtakingly beautiful.

"Wow."

"I could not have said this better myself," Teagan next to me agrees. I glare daggers at him, causing him to hold up his hands in defense. "Peace, young man, I got the message."

Rori gracefully floats towards the table, pleasantly greets the assembled guests and then approaches her seat next to me. I jump to my feet so quickly I knock my chair over, just to beat the servant in helping her getting seated. My reward is the sweetest smile.

Lifting the hem of her skirt as not to step onto it, she gracefully slides onto her chair. That's when I catch a glimpse at the shoes she is wearing. I bite my lips to stop myself from chuckling.

"I didn't know leather hunting boots were the latest fashion to go with Orlesian silk dresses," I murmur into her ear once everybody else has gone back to making conversation.

"You haven't seen the shoes Isolde picked to wear with that dress. I could kill someone with these heels. First of all myself when I stumble and break my neck," Rori hisses back.

"You look bewitchingly beautiful in that dress."

"You look bewitchingly beautiful in that dress."

"I better do. The corset is killing me." She wiggles around on her chair to find a position at least a bit comfortable. "I have no idea how they suppose me to eat anything when they squeeze my intestines into an ivory cage. Not to mention breathing. Whoever invented this instrument of torture must have thought it unnecessary for women to fill their lungs with fresh air."

"Beauty knows no pain."

Rori snorts in a way far from ladylike.

When the food is served she eats like a bird, although her eyes are huge and dark with hunger. I feel so sorry for her that I can't enjoy my food and showing solidarity hardly touch what the servants load onto my plate.

As soon as she can leave without proving to be rude she does. I excuse myself as well, causing Ser
Perth and Teagan some amusement according my hurried exit, and easily catch up with her before she can disappear inside of her room.

"I know where the kitchen is." That's all I got to say. Rori groans yearningly.

"You have to help me get out of this dress," she says as she pushes the door to her room open and pulls me inside after her.

"I beg you pardon?"

"I cannot open the lacing on my back on my own. Even an escape artist couldn't do this without help. You have to do it. Hurry." She turns her back to me and I fumble with the laces. Whoever tied her up did a damn solid job. This dress is better than any chastity belt.

"Here." Rori pulls a dagger from her boots and hands it to me. "Just cut it open."

"But..."

"ALISTAIR!" she cries.

Sighing I run the blade through the lacing. The dress falls off her shoulders, revealing her beautiful back. Then she is gone out of sight behind the screen. I always thought the first time I'd get to undress her in a bedroom would be a bit more romantic.

When Rori emerges from behind the screen she wears a beautiful dark blue velvet dress, matching the colour of her eyes. It's not as exclusive as the one she wore before, the one I ruined and have no idea how to explain to Isolde why I did so. This dress looks far more comfortable. It's more like Rori. In the powder-blue silk dress she looked breathtakingly beautiful but also artifical. Part of her charm is her unsophisticatedness. Now she has recovered it, she grabs my arm and drags me along.

"Kitchen. Which way?"

I take the lead. Her stomach rumbles loudly and mine answers. It's so silly we both have to laugh so hard we almost topple down the stairs.

The kitchen is empty that late at night, so Rori and I can raid the larder without having to explain why we sit on the floor between the shelves and barrels, the boxes and jars, and stuff ourselves with food as if we haven't had anything to eat in weeks.

"Looks worse than when Barkley got into Nan's larder back at home," Rori says once the hunger is tamed. We clean the mess we made but that cannot hide the biting marks on the cheese - I so love cheese! - ham and bread. In the end we decide to destroy the evidence and pack all the things that could give us away into a huge basket.

This is one of the most peaceful moments I was yet granted to experience with Rori. It is strange because without the Blight and all the tragedies I'd never gotten to know her. We'd never have met. Now with all our loved ones and brothers in arms dead, there's only she and I left.

"Come on, I show you one of my most favourite places in the castle. I used to hide there when I was a boy."

There's a huge arched window high above the ground in the entrance hall. You can reach it when you climb onto the statues flanking it. Then it's not much of an effort to pull yourself onto the wide window sill where even two grown ups can comfortably sit and watch what's going on below. The stained glass in the window shows the crest of Redcliffe and behind the bordeaux tapestries with yet...
Rori and I sit on the window sill with the basket in between us and a bottle of wine or two and listen to the rain drum at the stained glass. It's one of these perfect moments I will always remember.

I give a rather apt imitation of the Revered Mother when I tell Rori about my life at the Chantry. She laughs so hard, I have to grab her arm to stop her from falling off the window sill. She leans against me for support and smiles at me shyly, I smile in return and that's when she blurts out: "I really do enjoy your company."

"I was just thinking the same," I admit all flustered about how close she is. "Given the circumstances, things could have been much worse. I am grateful that you are you... and not some other Grey Warden...Umm... that sounded better in my head." Much better. And less awkward. "I just mean to say that I can't imaging having done this without you..."

"My sentiments exactly," Rori slurs, beaming brightly at me.

"Now we only have to be rid of the pesky archdemon and everything would be normal," I chuckle bashfully, wondering about how Rori over and over again manages to make my heart beat faster.

It's past midnight when we finally climb down to return to our rooms. That's also when I remember I got the box with the flower still in my pocket because I almost smash it when I land on my hindquarters when Rori loses her footing and we both tumble down.

"I think I've had too much wine," she hiccups, trying to scramble back to her feet. I help her stand and she holds on to my arm for support. I can't get rid of the feeling she doesn't need as much support as she wants me to believe. But who am I to complain?

"I think we both had." Or I wouldn't even consider doing what I do when we reach the door of her room. It's my last chance and nervously I pull the box from my pocket and hand the rose to her.

"Here, look at this. Do you know what this is?" Stupid question to ask. Of course she knows it's a rose.

"Your new weapon of choice?" she teases, aiming the flower at me as if it was a dagger.

"Yes, that's right. Watch as I thrash our enemies with the mighty power of floral arrangements. Feel my thorns, darkspawn! I will overpower you with my rosy scent!" At least I make her giggle. That's a good sign, right? "Or, you know, it could just be a rose. I know that's pretty dull in comparison."

"Sentiment can be a very potent weapon," she points out during her hiccups.

"I picked it in Lothering. I remember thinking: How could something so beautiful exist in a place with so much despair and ugliness? I probably should have left it alone, but I couldn't. The darkspawn would come and their taint would just destroy it. So I've had it ever since." 

"That's a nice sentiment." She turns the rose around in her hands, her fingertips caressing the soft petals. "It's amazing it's still so... fresh... as if you just plucked it," she muses.

"I thought that I might... give it to you, actually. In a lot of ways I think the same when I look at you."

Now, that makes her blush. She's almost as red as the flower she holds to her lips. But Rori wouldn't be Rori if she didn't know exactly how to do a riposte. "Feeling a little thorny, are we?"
“Wow. ‘She'll never see through that,’ I told myself. Boy, was I wrong!” I grin, she grins and it's all a rather awkward but beautiful moment.

"Thank you, Alistair, that's a lovely thought."

"I'm glad you like it." And relieved. Boy, am I relieved! "I was just thinking... here I am doing all this complaining, and you haven't exactly been having a good time of it yourself. You've had none of the good experiences of being a Grey Warden since your Joining, not a word of thanks or congratulations." Instead she was hauled into a deadly battle right after drinking a cup of poison and was labelled a traitor for risking her life to light a beacon that had never been meant to be lit. As if that didn't suck enough, her family got slaughtered right in front of her eyes. "It's all been death and fighting and tragedy. I thought maybe I could say something. Tell you what a rare and wonderful thing you are to find amidst all this... darkness."

For what seems like an eternity she just stands there with the rose in her hands, blinking at me with her huge blue eyes. "I feel the same thing about you," she finally whispers. I can hardly understand her because all the time through my little speech her hiccup hasn't stopped. It's an incredibly cute sound.

"I'm glad you like it. Now... if we could move right on past these awkward, embarrassing stage and get right to the steamy bits. I'd appreciate it."

There it is, this demonic grin of hers that means nothing but trouble. Mischievous little vixen! "Sounds good! Off with your clothes then!" She grabs me by the front of my shirt, attempting to pull me into her room. This very moment I don't know if she's joking or not. Maybe she's just better at bluffing.

"Bluff called! Damn. She saw right through me."

"You're so cute when you're bashful." Rori lets go of my shirt and instead tiptoes to kiss my cheek. That doesn't make things any better for me. How could she turn this all on me when it was her blushing deep crimson only such a short time ago.

"I'll be... I'll better go to my room until the blushing stops. Just to be safe. You know how it is."

"Good night, Alistair." Her way to say my name is like music. Even when she stretches the syllables thanks to her hiccup.

"Good night, Rori." Her door closes in my face and I still stand there, grinning like a complete retard. That's when Wynne comes staggering down the corridor. She can hardly keep herself on her own feet and keeps bouncing at the walls.

"Wynne! Are you drunk?"

"Only a little tipsy, son, only a little tipsy."

And then she just collapses and I am left standing there with a knee-walking drunk granny mage. Great. Just exactly what I was looking for. I manage to drag her to her room and just when I haul her onto her bed, her eyes flutter open. "Alistair? What are you doing?!!"

"Uhm... errr..." But she has passed out again. I so do hope she remembers none of this tomorrow.
Chapter Notes

In DAO Alistair claims he never took lyrium. It was said later by the developers of the game that he did take it as a recruit but stopped. He still could use his templar skills for a long time afterwards (Dragon Age Wiki).

The next day our first stop is the village. We need some supplies, more tents now our party has become larger. With the undead gone, Redcliffe has returned to almost normal. Stores are open, merchants don’t just pass by but actually stop to sell their goods.

We stroll through the aisle between the market stalls in front of the Chantry. Sten meanwhile looks after Barkley, the horse and the luggage. Shopping in his opinion is a waste of time. Wynne is the best bargainer I’ve ever seen. With her we probably spend only half of the money for all the things the girls think are useful. She has this special way to approach the merchants. First she lures them into safety - how much harm can a granny do? And then - bang! - she lashes out, not ever once raising her voice.

While Wynne stomps one of the merchants into the ground, I take a look around. There's a toy stall with all kinds of toys. But what really catches my eye are the Grey Warden dolls. I pick one up. It looks a lot like Duncan - kinda - and put it to ride on a little wooden horse, clicking my tongue to imitate the noise of the hooves.

"Buy one and you get the horse for free, buy two and you'll get a third one and the horse." the merchant says when he sees me with the doll. "They are on sale."

"Why so?"

"Ah, you know, with the Blight and all the darkspawn I thought Grey Warden dolls would sell well. But then it turns out the Wardens are traitors and killed King Cailan. Now I have several hundred dolls and nobody wants them." He shrugs and throws the doll he has picked up back onto the table carelessly. "I can always burn them if nobody is interested. What a waste!"

The thought of all the little dolls burnt makes me so sad that I wish I could buy them all to save them.

"Awww, is the little boy playing with dolls," Morrigan sneers behind me while I still wonder how to persuade Rori to purchase an army of dolls. "I always suspected you to be infantile." Reluctantly I put the doll back down. I wouldn't care if it was only Morrigan but Rori is with her and last thing I want is her getting the wrong impression.

Fooling yourself, aren't you, Alistair? Rori knows you're just a big boy.

In the end I don't buy the doll. Wynne herds us all out of the market before I can make up my mind and too soon we're on the road again, heading for Denerim to find Brother Genitivi. The only thing that cheers me up now is that I might get to visit my sister once we're in the city. At the same time I'm so scared that I wish Rori would find excuses why we don't have time to see Goldanna.

On top of the hill next to the mill, Rori turns back for a last view of Redcliffe. "It looks so peaceful
now. As if nothing ever happened. I wonder..." Her voice fades as she presses her lips together. She sniffs and blinks furiously when tears begin to well in her eyes.

"Rori? Hey, what's wrong?" I can think of a thousand things that are wrong. A thousand things to make her cry.

"Ah, don't worry. Just thinking about Highever. It's nothing, really. Let's go. The show must go on." She straightens her narrow shoulders and shakes her head as if that way she could get rid of the memories that haunt her.

I remember she said she'd come with me to Highever after all this is over and help me put up some memorial for Duncan. I have not thought about her family and what she has lost there as I was wading in selfpity, complaining about my own loss. Rori doesn't even know what happened to her family, what they did with the dead. She didn't get the chance to bury them, doesn't have a place to return to, nothing.

I take her hand in mine, that's all the comfort I am able to offer. She doesn't pull away but her fingers intertwine with mine.

We're only a short walk away from Redcliffe when an elven woman comes running towards us. She looks frantic, crying for help. "Oh please, please help us! We got ambushed! This way, please, hurry!"

I jog right after her when Rori stops me. "There's something odd about this," she murmurs.

"Indeed," Leliana agrees.

"So we don't help her?" i am puzzled. What's odd about this? I can't see anything odd. There's a woman who needs help, that's all that counts for me.

"We do help her but we are watchful," Rori decides. Slowly she follows the waiting woman that frantically waves at us.

"Hurry, oh, please, hurry!"

"No blood." Rori mumbles.

"Not even got her dress smudged or crinkled," Leliana adds. "And don't you think she's exaggerating it?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure," Rori answers.

I have no clue what the two of them are talking about. Rori is as tense as a strung bow. Her eyes dart to either side of the road. Leliana next to her has pulled an arrow from her quiver. The woman shows us the way, running down the path until the wagons come into sight. Her jogging slows down to swagging. And now even I notice that there's no injured or dead, no sign of a fight anywhere close by.

From behind the wagon a blonde elf emerges. His sneer is enough for me to greatly dislike him. Rori reaches for her swords the moment the elf raises his hand to alert the archers on both sides of the path.

"What...?" I begin when Rori cries: "TREE!" I throw myself forward, pulling Wynne with me. Rori does a sumersault that brings her back to her feet in one fluent movement. While Wynne and I still try to scramble out of the dirt, Rori charges the blonde elf in the ridiculous golden leather armour.
She dodges past the assassins that try to block her path, tripping one of them up so that he tumbles straight into my sword.

"She's mine!" the elf cries, obviously the leader of the group. "Dance with me, beautiful!" He draws his swords, swinging them towards Rori.

"Be careful, I might step on your toes," Rori retorts. Being a smartass even when some freaking assassin is aiming for her throat.

"My toes should be the last thing you should worry about... OWW!"

Ha! Rori dives out of the way of his soaring blades, pirouettes and stomps onto his foot with her heel. It makes him lose footing and she rams her elbow right into his solar plexus to send him down. The elf gasps, holding his side, but Rori isn't wasting any time with him. She crashes the hilt of her dagger against his temple and Ser Loudmouth collapses to the ground.

Leliana, Wynne and Morrigan have sought cover close to the fallen tree that almost smashed us and has separated us from Sten and Barkley. However, a fallen tree isn't much of a hindrance for a Mabari. With a loud howl Barkley soars over the tree, jumping for the throat of the first attacker stupid enough to cross his path. A curtain fire of arrows from Leliana and magic missiles from Morrigan and Wynne save Rori and me from being turned into a pair of porcupines. One arrow hits my thigh but doesn't pierce my armour.

Before Sten has managed to overcome the tree, Rori and I have made short work with the sword fighters and hurry towards the archers.

"Traps!" Rori cries, darting forward to reach the slope that will lead her towards the archers. She points the traps out for me, then she takes the right and I take the left side. Barkley follows her, Sten is at my heels.

It's over quickly. Whatever the assassins have planned, this for sure wasn't part of it.

Rori wipes the blood off her face with the back of her hand. There's a cut in her armour right above her wrists. It's not deep, nothing to get too worried about but still I do.

"You're hurt! Wynne! Wynne! Rori is hurt!"

"It's only a cut, Alistair, relax." She puts her hands on my arm soothingly.

As if I could relax at the sight of her blood. It's been a tough thing for me from the beginning but ever since I started to... care... I just don't take it easy when anybody hurts her.

"Better let Wynne have a look at it," Leliana advises. "Scum like them often uses poison."

While Wynne tends Rori's cut, I tie the wrists and ankles of the unconscious elven assassin. Barkley keeps watch over him in case he should wake and make a wrong move.

"What do you want to do with him?" I inquire when Rori joins me.

"Ask him some questions." She pets the dog. "Barkley, wake him." The Mabari woofs, then licks the face of the unfortunate elf, drool dripping out of his mouth - Barkley's of course, not the elf's.

"Uh, oh? EWWWW!" The elf comes back to life. "Take that beast away from me!"

Rori calls her dog and the Mabari immediately obeys, sitting next to her feet. He is watchful, though,
and so am I. Rori crosses her arms in front of her chest. "I have some questions and you will answer
them."

The only answer I am looking for is why he wanted to kill us and who sent him after us. Then I'm
ready to send him back to the Maker. Why Rori listens to his probably made up story about him
having been sold to the Antivian Crows as a child is beyond me. It's not that I don't feel sorry for
those who are less fortunate than I am - considering I am a bastard I was indeed lucky someone cared
for me. Still, when someone tries to murder me - and Rori! - it's something personal.

So when Rori invites him to join us I can't keep my mouth shut. "Excuse us, please." I take her by
the arm and drag her away from the rest of the group.

"You have to be kidding!" I snap once we are out of earshot.

"No, I'm not. I told you he could be useful. Trust me, Alistair, please."

"How useful can he probably be? He'll cut our throats while we sleep. You're being useful for him."

"I don't think he'll try again." That's not really an argument. She could point out we already have an
apostate, a murderer, a crazy bard with divine visions and a magical grandma following us around.
But none of them tried to kill us!

"And what makes you think so? His oh-so-sad-childhood stories?"

"No, I can't name it. It's just a feeling he's being honest. I feel I can trust him for now."

"Did you have that same feeling with Arl Howe?" The moment the words leave my mouth I regret it.
Even more when I see the look on her face. My blow hits the mark and the injury I cause is far worse
from what I intended. All I want is to protect her. I don't trust the elf and I do not understand why she
does. Now she is hurt, deeply hurt. Tears well up in her eyes and it's my fault she's crying. She
doesn't even argue about it. She just turns her back at me to leave. I try to stop her. "Rori!"

"Leave me alone, Alistair!"

Ouch! Oh, this is painful. My heart aches - literally. I didn't know that's how it really feels but it does.
Up to now I always thought the word heartache to be a metaphor. But the pain in my chest is really
there. Three little words stabbing me right in the heart. It's worse than when I didn't tell her about my
father being King Maric for such a long time. She told me she was hurt then by my lack of trust. I
could explain this to her but this time... I groan. This time I really fucked up.

And there Leliana asked me if I was worried that things wouldn't proceed naturally.

Damn, yes, I am worried.

Asking women if they are female is not my biggest problem.

For the rest of the day Rori avoids me. I see her chatting with Zevran, the murderous elf, and I can't
help wondering if she does this on purpose to pay me back. Isn't that paranoid? And how stuck up
with myself must I be when I think everything she does is about me? As far as I know she now could
give a damn about me.

"Has Rori finally found out what a complete failure you are?" Morrigan remarks when she
approaches me. She actually walks faster to catch up with me only to rub this in.

"I wouldn't be too happy about that if I was you. If she figured out she will also see what a mean
beast you are," I growl. Morrigan gives me a whole lot fantasies about violence and death. Her death.

Just because Rori is mad at me doesn't change anything about me wanting to protect her. And if that means I have to talk to Zevran to find out more about him - either to prove me wrong or find a reason to get rid of him - then I'll do it.

"So why would the Crows send you, Zevran?" No hello, no how are you, no let's just chat for a while. I'm not here for making friends.

"Is there some reason why they should not?" The elf arches an eyebrow. His accent is ridiculous. I have no idea why Leliana thinks it's sexy.

"Plenty of reasons. Starting with the fact that you weren't exactly the best they had, were you?" Honestly, I am glad they didn't send the best. And if they did then I can sleep much better at night because Zevran is not the epitome of skilled fighting. Alright, Rori was lucky that he went down so fast. He clearly underestimated her. People do that a lot. They see a little girl and when she draws her swords, they go: Didn't your mama tell you not to play with knives?

"Slander and lies. For shame, Alistair."

"I'm not an idiot." Pause. Considering I just seriously messed up with Rori this might not be altogether true. "Well, not most of the time. You're no raw recruit, but I've seen you fight. You're no master of combat, by any means."

"Assuming that I intended a fair fight, that would indeed be a problem."

Now, that's going to make me feel much better! I can already feel the paranoia rising. And that's something I totally can't stand. It reminds me of the effect lyrium had on me. I hate that stuff. And I am so glad I don't have to take it any longer. "But the Crows must have master assassins, the way you describe them. Men with years and years of experience. Why not send them?" Or will they still be sent now Zevran has failed? If he has. He could always try again.

"Why not, indeed? It is a mystery for the ages."

I frown. Is he avoiding an answer? He hasn't really given me anything at all. Blast it, he won't, will he? "Oh, I get it. You're not going to tell me."

"Morrigan said you were sharp. No liar, she."

I so can't stand the two of them. "I will find out. Sooner or later." Hopefully not too late. I sigh and turn to look at Rori. She is talking to Sten. That's probably as much fun as talking to Zevran. He's still questioning her female-ness. He'd only have to ask Leliana to receive an advice that this is never a wise thing to do.

This turns out to be the longest day I ever had to endure. Now that Rori deliberatedly avoids me I realize how much time I spend with her when on the road, how much we actually talk and jest, how much fun we have together. Oh blast it!

I'm so bored and frustrated, I keep glowering at Zevran just because I need someone to blame. Without him I'd be now walking beside Rori and she'd tell me about how she and Fergus drove Nan crazy when she was a kid.

"Still with the stern glances, Alistair?"
I almost have a heartattack when Zevran sneaks upon me. Whoa! He for sure can move silently.
"You didn't answer my question. About why the Crows wouldn't send their best man," I complain sullenly.

"So for that I must suffer all these fearsome glares? You are cruel to subject me to such torture," Zevran purrs. He puts his hands over his heart and looks up at me with wide eyes and an innocent, pained smile. Then he casts his eyes down and when he looks up at me again, he licks his lips slowly.

Err...? Huh? Somehow I'm getting the impression I'm missing something. "If you aren't telling me, there must be a reason."

Zevran sighs, obviously exasperated. He casts a look at Rori walking behind us. Whatever he sees in her, he makes up his mind about telling me what I want to know. "If you must know, the masters do not often take contracts outside Antiva. And I made the best bid." At least he talks normal again. Without that strange purr, I mean. The accent won't vanish. And he has stopped smiling at me as if I was... prey? Better not think about it.

"Best bid?"

"We agree to pay the guild a portion of whatever the contract offers," Zevran explains. "The one who agrees to pay the most gets the contract, so long as the guild deems them worthy."

"And they thought you were worthy?"

"Against a pair of Grey Warden recruits?" he chuckles. "Apparently so."

"Were there many who wanted the contract?"

"None," he admits. "You are still Grey Wardens, after all, and even in Antiva, killing members of your order is considered... impolitic. It made the guild's decision considerably easier, I imagine."

"Well, that's comforting, somehow." At least there won't be any more then, will there? What makes me worry is that Zevran would volunteer nonetheless. He didn't care at all that we are Grey Wardens.

"So you will stop glaring daggers at me now?"

"For now, yes. But I still don't trust you."

"You are indeed smarter than you look," Zevran laughs. He glances at Rori again. "You two argued about me, didn't you?"

Oh, he doesn't have to sound so proud of it, does he? "It's really none of your business." I snap and cause Zevran to laugh out loud. That two-faced bastard!

I know I have to apologize to Rori but I'd rather do it in private. Rori doesn't give me a chance, though. She really doesn't want to be with me and when we finally set up camp, I am so devastated I even consider to offer her to leave for good. I put up my tent then volunteer to fetch water. When I return the others have gathered around the camp fire but I seek solitude. I think I might be going to bed early.

I open my backpack and there right on top sits the Grey Warden doll I've been playing with at the market. Next to it there's the wooden horse. I stare at it for what seems an eternity, trying to figure how it got there. The only explanation I can find is that Rori put it there. She must have bought it for...
me as a surprise. Now I feel even more like a complete jerk.

I sit down with the doll in my hand, wondering what I could probably do to make things right again. "What would you do?" I ask the doll.

"Pull yourself together and ask for forgiveness," I have the doll tell me. "Then end the Blight and save the world. Can't be that big of a problem."

Then, as nobody is watching, I play with my doll, having it ride on its faithful horse... until a shadow is cast over me. I look up to see Rori but before I can say anything to her, she turns her back on me and rummages in her backpack.

I sigh heavily. This is going to be a tough thing. Far worse than I thought. I clear my throat and try to put some sentences together in my mind that maybe don't sound completely idiotic when Rori turns back to me.

She has pulled her rainbow coloured striped sock over her hand like a glove puppet.

"Mwahaha! Grey Warden, have you come to try and slay me?" Rori intones in her version of a deep, evil voice.

Oh boy! Does that mean she's not mad at me anymore?

I can't help grinning when I pick up my Grey Warden doll and its horse. "Archdemon! Your time has come! Prepare to die!"

The sock demon snorts. "Being quite cocksure, are we? I didn't have any breakfast yet, you come in the nick of time!" The sock demon darts forward, its brightly coloured mouth wide open. The Grey Warden lunges sideways but faithful horse is too slow and ends as an appetizer.

"Faithful horse!" The Grey Warden doll cries out and charges with its wooden sword, bringing it down on the archdemon's head. The evil creature wails in pain and, hissing like a snake, tries to bite the doll's head off.

This is when out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of the rest of our party assembled. They stand and stare in companionable shocked silence.

"Uhm..."

What an awkwardly embarrassing moment! They all look at Rori and me as if we have lost our marbles. Which we probably have.

While I still search for something witty to say, the archdemon attacks - "Mwahahaha!" - and the Grey Warden doll is snatched from my hand, clutched between the jaws of the sock demon. "Nom, nom, nom." The archdemon gnaws on the poor Grey Warden, gulps and... burps.

I stare at Rori. Rori stares back at me. And then we both laugh ourselves to tears.

I can hardly hear Morrigan say: "These two are the last Grey Wardens in Ferelden, our only hope to stop the Blight and slay the archdemon. We're all doomed."
Adorkable art by Erusel (http://onehundred-fandoms.tumblr.com/)
"Rori?" She turns when I call her and slows down so that she can walk beside me.

"What's up?" She's back to her usual amiable, often flirtatious behaviour when dealing with me. Still I feel I owe her a proper apology.

"I just wanted to say... I am sorry. You know, for what I said yesterday."

"It's alright, Alistair. I overreacted. You were worried and... maybe you're right. I cannot really explain what made me spare Zevran. It's... just a feeling." She shrugs.

A feeling? I don't like the sound of that.

"What kind of... feeling?" I inquire. She's totally oblivious, while the mere mentioning of Zevran and feelings in one sentence already makes me...oh, I don't know. I don't like it. Not at all.

"Oh, you know, that he deserves a second chance."
"A second chance to murder you?" I cannot help it but this time she's not offended. She just punches me in the arm. CLONK go her knuckles against the metal of my armour.

"Ouch! You are a violent woman."

"As if you felt anything at all." Rori snorts. She rubs her knuckles and pulls a face. That's what you get for punching a man in a full plate armour. "It's true, you know, the Crows do kill those who fail. I remember Elsa telling me about them. I cannot recall all of it, but that I know. So we are his only option right now. And I am planning to turn this into an opportunity for ourselves. We need any help we can get. And it's not as if he doesn't fit in."

We both watch the backs of our companions. A murderer, An apostate, A weird former bard with divine visions. An assassin. And a sweet granny mage.

"Wynne doesn't fit in," I observe.

"I was thinking the same. She's far too nice and normal."

"For a mage." I add.

"We should be suspicious. I bet she hides a horrible secret," Rori jokes but her voice fades when she realizes what she has just hinted at. After what happened at the tower, Wynne indeed could hide something. Or something could hide inside of her. My templar training makes me paranoid.

"What about us?" Rori asks after a while. "How do we fit in?"

"Well, I am the fool."

"And I am the naif who thinks she can stop the Blight with a group of assembled outcasts."

"Seems the dog is the only one sane."

"Maybe he should lead then."

We have reached Bann Loren's lands. Zevran is ahead of the group and we all clonk and clatter after him. Well, Sten and I do. It is absolutely impossible to move silently when you wear heavy armour. I am used to it thanks to my templar training, still heavy means heavy and I grow tired more easily than Rori who still has the energy to balance on fallen tree trunks. The assassins had two horses. If we can find two more we can have a group ride ahead while the others follow with our luggage and supply.

Suddenly the elf raises his hand to alert us. He motions us to be silent and Sten and I freeze dead. Rori and Leliana silently sneak closer and observe what happens below. When the riot starts Sten and I can join the others without alarming whoever Rori is watching.

Down the slope soldiers shove a man around that seems slightly familiar. "I have seen him in Ostagar," Rori whispers excitedly. "He was one of Cailan's men."

"The soldiers belong to Bann Loren," I whisper. And they clearly intend to kill the man Rori remembers. I am about to ask her if we are going to sit here and watch him being murdered when Rori jumps up.

"HEY!" she calls. "What are you doing..." She doesn't get to end the sentence. One guard cuts the poor man down, the others charge us.
"They are witnesses!" one soldier cries. And that obviously means he intends to silence us. Rori lunges forward - I really have to have a little chat with her about tactics. The way she throws herself into battles gives me a headache. I am her backup again because she never looks right or left. She chooses her target, mostly the one she wants to go down first. Her choice is well made, she just tends to forget there are others around her target and there's us.

Zevran earns some credit points when he backstabs a soldier that's about to backstab Rori. He has to neglect his own defense to aid her and drops to the ground with the slain soldier to avoid being killed himself.

He couldn't have found a better possibility to get rid of Rori. But he saved her. She spins round to see Zevran on top of the corpse on the ground and another soldier charging. With a little yelp that can hardly be called a battle cry, she leaps across Zevran and crashes against the soldier feet first.

He falls and I ram my sword into his throat. Andraste's flaming sword! This is not a circus! Mental note to myself: tactic lessons for Rori. And Morrigan. The two of them obviously have hardly ever fought in groups.

I help Zevran get back to his feet. "Does she always fight like this?" he slurs with his heavy accent.

"You tell me. That's how she knocked you out in... ten seconds?"

"It was thirty seconds at least," Zevran huffs.

"Twenty."

"Too quick for sure. i underestimated her, I admit. But if you want her to stay alive, she has to learn to fit into the group."

And there I thought Zevran and I would never agree on anything.

Rori hurries to kneel next to the wounded man. "Wynne, can you help him?"

"I'm afraid it's too late," the mage answers sadly when the man with his dying breath gives Rori the information he thinks save with us.

Ostagar. Cailan's documents. It sounds important but we also have to meet Genitivi to find a way to heal Eamon. I can tell Rori ponders about her options while we pile stones on top of the corpse as a makeshift grave. Leliana says a prayer for him and then it's time to leave.

"Ostagar," Rori says firmly. I don't object although there's many memories connected to that place I'd rather forget. "The mages caring for Eamon said his condition is serious but not lethal at the moment. They also explained they can ensure he doesn't get worse for a few more months... not that we want to make him wait this long... but I believe it is important to find these documents."

I like this about her. She doesn't just give orders but explains why she does things. Not to a point where she'd discuss her decisions endlessly, still you never feel like she just regards her companions as subjects.

Morrigan is very silent while Rori explains that she wants to return to Ostagar. When we leave Bann Loren's lands, she beckons Rori to walk with her. Morrigan looks... worried... almost scared. It's the first time she appears human. Almost human. She intensely talks to Rori. I am almost sure I won't like whatever will be the outcome of this conversation. And I almost stumble over my own feet, roots and rocks while I crane my neck to keep an eye on them.
Once Rori leaves Morrigan, the apostate looks utterly relieved. She even smiles at Rori. Now I am totally sure I won't like whatever she is up to.

"What was this about?" I ask Rori when she joins me. She has made a habit out of walking beside me. And I enjoy her company. A lot.

"I will tell you later, promised. First we have to go to Ostagar."

"Ah... yes... and before we go there... have you ever heard about something called tactics?"
Alistair's first kiss

Darkness surrounds me. The silence is only disturbed by my own harsh breathing and the blood rushing in my veins. I try to get up but my body feels so heavy I can hardly move. All I manage is to crawl. The ground is cold rock, I feel my way around, my fingers brushing against something soft and cold, then metal and leather. An armour? I move on, and cry out when my fingers creep across a face, covered with a sticky liquid. The facial structure is delicate, a very young man, maybe a boy? Or an elf? No, there's no pointy ears. Could it be a woman? The hair is short but silky beneath my fingers. I can't get rid of the sickening feeling that I should know.

And then there's light. A sick reddish glow that starts to well up around me, becoming stronger and harsher. Out of the corner of my eyes I can see the corpses of darkspawn littering the ground. I am in the very center of death and when I look down I stare right into Rori's destroyed face, her eyes broken and dull. She's dead.

With a cry I wake from yet another nightmare. My heart is drumming so hard against my ribcage, I'm afraid it will break through. Cold sweat covers my brow and chest. I wipe myself dry, trying to steady my shaking hands. Damn, that was a tough one. It's in the middle of the night but I cannot go back to sleep. At the break of dawn, Rori will return to Ostagar with Wynne, Sten and me. I should make sure I get as much rest as possible but all I end up with is tossing and turning.

My thoughts keep returning to Rori and the fear I feel about losing her. It's weird, although I was extremely fond of Duncan - in a very manly way, not that any of you gets the wrong impression -, almost father-to-son fond, I was never really afraid of losing him. Not until I did lose him. Rori has been different from the beginning. Is that all only about her being a girl... or is it... more? Which of course includes her being a girl or I wouldn't lie here in the dark and wonder about how I feel. Do I care for her? My heart tells me yes, at least I think so. I am so confused. Would I feel the same for her if fate - and the Blight - hadn't chained us together for mission impossible? Would she still be such a wonderful and beautiful flower without all that? And would she even care to notice me?

I cannot know for sure. Not as long as I haven't asked her. But should I? What if she doesn't feel anything for me? Or not like I do for her? Has she been flirting? I think she has, but who am I to know? I am clueless when it comes to women.

Tomorrow we will return to Ostagar. To where it all began. To where I first met her. To where I lost so much and - maybe - gained more than I ever dared to dream of.

And now whenever I close my eyes, I see her dead face, empty eyes staring back at me.

In the end I give up, put on a shirt, some leather pants and boots. Maybe a walk will clear my head and help me get back to sleep without that awful image of Rori's dead face poping up in my head all the time. I crawl to the entrance of my tent and peek out.

It's Rori's watch. She sits at the campfire with Barkley at her feet. In her hands she holds the rose I have given her a few days ago. Her fingers gently brush across the crimson petals. Then she inhales the sweet scent, her lips brushing against the velvet blossom. How carefully she handles the flower like a precious gem. She said she liked it when I gave it to her, but seeing her with it is something totally different. There's no mistaking that Rori meant it when she thanked me for the flower and for the sentiment that went with me giving it to her.

It's the reason why I make up my mind. Her gentleness with the flower gives me courage.
Rori looks up when I crawl out of my tent. "Nightmares?" she asks. I simply nod. She is the only one here who really understands what it means to be a Grey Warden.

"Can I sit with you for a while?"

"Of course you can." She carefully places the flower back into the box and puts it back into her backpack with as much care.

"You remember the tactics for tomorrow?" I ask when I slump down next to her. Come on, Alistair, that's not what you want to ask her!

"I think I do. But it would be better if you showed me again in the morning. And if you reminded me when we enter Ostagar." Rori wasn't offended when I made it clear that her way of fighting is going to kill us all. She just nodded and listened carefully. That's part of what makes her a good leader. She doesn't insist that she knows it all - and better than anybody else. After letting me talk about different tactics for five minutes, she decided I should plan the battles, train the group to fight together and advice her in any way concerning battles. "Maybe you should lead us there, Alistair," she says after a moment of silence - a moment that is completely lost to me as I am bewitched by her beauty, how the fire makes her eyes shine and how cute she looks when she is tired. "I will have to heavily rely on you anyway."

"I didn't mean to unsettle you..."

"You didn't!" Rori hurries to say. "You're right, I have never fought in a real battle before Ostagar. There was the training, and Father took me hunting. My first real fight was when my home was attacked. I lack the experience you have and I don't see why I should insist on doing something you can do better."

I feel a bit uncomfortable. Does that mean she will now drop this all on me? She knows I rather follow orders.

"We're in this together, Alistair," Rori assures me. "I won't let you down - just like you won't let me down."

Maker bless that girl! So it's now or never, Alistair! Do you have the courage to ask her now or do you want to wait until the Blight is over? Or until it's too late... until she is taken from you. You never told Duncan that he was like a father for you. You never had the courage, thought it awkward, odd, a bit weird. Now he's gone, and you wish you had thanked him at least.

So... how do I start this.

I inhale deeply, searching for the right words in my head. Not that I ever find them. So finally I just blurt out: "So, all this time we spent together... you know, the tragedy, the brushes with death, the constant battle with the whole Blight looming over us... will you miss it once it's over?"

Rori gives me the answer such an idiotic question deserves. "It makes me tear up just thinking about it." Oh, she's teasing. Well, she has no clue what I want to tell her. How could she after that opening?

I laugh when she pulls a handkerchief from her pocket - my handkerchief that I have given her a while ago when she was crying -, blows her nose as noisily as possible and acts as if she wipes a tear out of the corner of her eye. I get it, I get it! "There'll be no more running for our lives, no more darkspawn and no more camping in the middle of nowhere." Now, how sad does that sound?

"No more icy rivers to wash in," Rori adds. "No more of your awful cooking, or even worse, my
awful cooking." We forbade Rori to cook after she did it for the first time. One of the rare occasions when Morrigan and I agreed.

"No more filthy stinking socks in our backpacks."

"No more rain seeping into our armours."

"No more rusty armours."

"That, too," Rori agrees. "No more keeping watch in the middle of the night and not getting enough sleep."

We could go on like that forever.

Another deep breath and I turn towards her, seeking her full attention. She looks at me quizzically with her beautiful blue eyes. Come on, boy, spit it out! This can't hurt more than being struck by a sword.

"I know it... might sound strange, considering we haven't known each other for very long, but I've come to... care for you. A great deal."

Before Rori can say something, I hurry on. I can't even stand to look at her too closely. At the same time, I try to read from her expression if she is going to laugh herself to tears any moment and tell me what a funny guy I am. She doesn't laugh but I swear her already big eyes become even larger and rounder.

"I think maybe it's because we've gone through so much together, I don't know. Or maybe I'm imagining it. Maybe I'm fooling myself."

Maybe I'm just digging my own grave again. Come on, ask her already. She's sitting there, staring at you as if you are about to sprout a second head. My heart by now beats so fast I'm afraid it's going to leap straight out of my throat.

"Am I? Fooling myself? Or do you think you might ever... feel the same about me?"

Do I sound meek? Or as if I was begging? For the love of Lady Andraste, say something Rori! I obviously dumbfounded her. After all that time I managed to say something that she has no smart reply for.

"I..." Rori begins, when I almost want to give up. Her voice is no more than a whisper. "I think... I already do." What? "Care... for you, I mean. Great deal." Say it again because I think I must be dreaming this. "But... I didn't know if this was all more than... just a game. I wondered... if I was imagining things... just like you." She laughs that clear ringing laughter of hers.

Merciful Andraste! I've never in my life felt so relieved. I think even after having survived the Joining I didn't feel such an immense relief. My heart is doing something very weird in my chest. There's a warmth spreading through me, making my nerves tingle from head to toe.

"So I fooled you, did I?" I raise my hand to brush my fingertips across her cheek, trailing my hand to the back of her neck to pull her closer to me. She leans into my touch, cranes her neck to meet my lips. "Good to know." And then I kiss her.

It's my very first real kiss ever. That unfortunate almost smooching with Sister Ariana in the backyard doesn't count. We were so nervous all we managed was to bang our foreheads together in a rather hurtful way. And then the Revered Mother caught us before we could try some more.
I am glad it didn't work.

Because now, being here with Rori, feeling the softness of her lips against mine, is the most heavenly sensation I ever felt. My arms wrap around her waist as I pull her closer and when her lips part, I slip my tongue into the hot cavern of her mouth. I have never imagined it would feel like that, hot and moist and soft. I have never imagined it would light a fire in my loins that burns hotter than Andraste's Flaming Sword. Uhm, the comparison with a sword might be a bit unfortunate in this context...

First it seems she is unsure of what is happening to her - but then she kisses me back eagerly until we are both breathless.

"That wasn't too soon, was it?" I'm usually not that bold. She hopefully isn't offended...

Rori tilts her head to one side, pouting her rosebud lips while she ponders about my question. "I don't know," she finally purrs. "I think I need more testing."

I grin at her broadly. "Well, I have to arrange that then, won't I?"

"Mhm..."

We kiss again. Less testing now that we have tasted each other already. Rori wraps her arms tighter around my neck, her body presses closer to mine, and her first timidness has altogether vanished. So has mine. One hand resting at the back of her head, the other at the small of her back. At that moment I'm not even afraid she could feel my arousal. Everything around us is blissfully oblivious while we kiss.

"You're sure now?" I ask, my breathing as ragged as hers. Rori looks at me with huge hungry eyes. She licks her swollen lips, shakes her head and before I can say a word she has grabbed me and kisses me again, deeply, longingly. Then she crawls onto my lap.

Whoa!

Wait! That's a bit too fast. And I have this... uhm... oh blast it... did she notice? She has stopped kissing me and blinks at me rather flabbergasted. Then she carefully climbs out of my lap again. Yes, she has noticed. Blast!

I am about to apologize but she puts her finger to my lips. "Hush," she whispers. Her voice has a new quality, husky and raw with emotion. Her fingertips whisper across my skin, the same way she caresses me whenever she helps me getting shaved in the morning. She has become part of that morning routine ever since my mirror broke. I could have gotten a new one... I just didn't want to.

Rori kneels beside me, her eyes dark and shining, the campfire illuminates her unruly red hair, like flames framing her delicate pale face. She's here, and she's mine.

"Maker's breath, but you're beautiful. I'm a lucky man."

"You're not too bad either." Rori grins, leaning against me, and I wrap my arms around her. It feels right. Better than anything has felt in a very long time. It's a bit like coming home after you have been on the road for all your life.

"Do you always have to have the last word?" I chuckle.

"Is that a rhetorical question?"
We get ready for our return to Ostagar. Morrigan complains about being left back. "Did I miss something? Why do you make the decisions now?"

"I don't. I give advice, that's all. Rori, Wynne and I have been in Ostagar before so we know the area. That can be an advantage. Sten is the only one here next to me with a warrior training. Ostagar is swarmed with darkspawn. We will need more than just mere luck to survive there."

"Hmph," Morrigan grunts. I take that as her way of expressing her approval.

I rummage through our armour chest until I find a helmet suitable. Nothing that will hinder the sight too much but enough to give some more protection. "This one will do." I put it gently on Rori's head. And she takes it off again immediately.

"Don't. I look stupid with a helmet."

"Oh, and you think a bashed in skull will make an improvement to your looks?"

I put the helmet back on her head. Rori pouts and I cross my arms in front of my chest. I'm not going to have any of this. She will wear that helmet and if I have to glue it to her head. I have only just found her and I am not going to risk losing her. I've been rather protective before but now we kissed, I somehow feel like she's mine. The fear of losing her has increased immensely. I cannot allow that fear to paralyze me. And I can't just trudge after Rori anymore now like I did before. So I actively take part in her decisions - like giving advice who should follow her to Ostagar. And like making her wear that damn helmet.

Rori takes the helmet off again and I snarl at her. She casts her eyes down and then with a flutter of her eyelashes gives me an upward glance that certainly has helped her persuading her poor father and brother and whoever other man she used it on to do whatever she wanted.

"No way. You are going to wear that helmet."

"Blast! Usually that works." Sulking she puts it back on.

I chuckle. "Good girl."

She sticks her tongue out at me. Being a little childish this morning, right? I laugh and cupping her chin make her look at me, tilting her head back. "You still look bewitchingly beautiful" Then I kiss her, getting lost in the sensation of the caress - until a loud clattering from behind makes us spin round. Leliana stands there, staring, the pots and pans she has just dropped lying at her feet.

"Oh, don't pay any attention to me," she squeals. "Just go on doing whatever you were just doing." She hurries to pick up her pots and pans and disappears as hurriedly.

"Oops," is all Rori says. I feel a bit awkward, like I was caught doing something forbidden. Also I don't want anybody to know what I feel for Rori. This is private. Something that only belongs to her and me. I don't want anybody to stick their noses into our business.

Leliana, Zevran and Morrigan stay back at the camp. We didn't dare to set up camp too close to Ostagar. There's too much darkspawn there, so we still have half a day to walk until we reach our destination.
It's creepy how abandoned and silent Ostagar is. Last time we've been here, there was a huge war camp, buzzing with noise - and life. Snow has fallen here in the middle of summer, covering the ground with innocent white. At least we don't have to look at the earth soaked with the blood of those who have died here. That's when Rori steps into a hole she hidden by the snow, a puddle filled to the rim with blood, and the whole mess soaks the snow, staining it.

"Eww!" Rori shakes her foot as if she can clean her boot that way. Then she makes the mistake to take a closer look at the hole and with a cry jumps backward. There's a hand visible under the snow. It's a graveyard we are walking on, stepping on the corpses of those who fought with us.

"Silence," Sten grumbles. I wonder if he ever gets upset by anything at all. Other than having lost his sword. Rori promised to find it for him. How she wants to do that is beyond me. All we have is a hint from a pillager that points us into the direction of the Frostback Mountains.

"I'm going to take a quick look around," Rori whispers. She doesn't dare to raise her voice. It's not only about the darkspawn detecting us, it's the whole atmosphere of that place. Leaving bloody footprints in the snow, Rori disappears behind a nearby column. My nerves are tense. It feels awkward to be back here.

"Something about returning here makes me feel old, Wynne," I sigh. Waiting for Rori's return I have to release some of my tension and fear into some conversation or bang my head against the next wall.

"And what exactly are you implying, Alistair?" Wynne asks sourly, crossing her arms in front of her chest.


"You just thought I might be an expert at feeling old and could share some sage advice?"

"I just mean that I was a different person then. I believed in him, you know? That it would be a glorious battle, that we'd win..." Cailan had that effect on people. He had an outshining personality. He was a true king. Not like me. I just happen to be the son of a king, but that doesn't make me one. And I don't want to be one. With Cailan it came naturally.

"I did too. We were all a little bit younger the last time we were here." Wynne's voice is gentler now.

"Well, not you. You've always been old."

The granny mage glares at me. "With lip like that, son, you'll be lucky if you live to be half my age."

I open my mouth to tell her that I got no more than thirty years to live anyway and that I doubt that's even half her age, but then I think it wiser to just shut up.

Rori returns and saves me from getting turned into a frog - by the look on Wynne's face that's exactly what I fear will happen.

"With the snow it's impossible to hide for long. Our dark clothes make us stick out. Darkspawn around the next corner where Cailan held his last meeting, not too many but if we don't climb onto the walls I don't see how we can get close enough for an attack without them seeing us long before we reach them."

"Okay, Rori, Wynne, you help Sten and me with a fire curtain."

"I'm better with my swords than with the bow," Rori points out.
"As long as you don't hit Sten or me. Just make sure the archers and emissaries don't spike or broil us before we even get close enough to attack them. Sten left side, I'm on the right. Once we're there, Rori, you enter close-range-battle." I really don't want to risk being hit by one of her arrows when she has doubts herself. I've seen her handle her bow in the Korcari Wilds. She's not bad, but truth is, there are far better than her.

Done as said we overcome the darkspawn without anybody getting hurt. That's how it's supposed to be. Then Rori to detect the first part of Cailan's armor.

"That was his." She immediately begins to shed the darkspawn out of it. I help her with the heavy corpse. She's just a petite girl after all. The armour piece is covered with the foul ichor of the darkspawn, tainted by it. The sight of it makes me sick. I stand there, holding in my hands what once belonged to Cailan, my king, my brother - although we didn't really know each other. One look at my face and Rori gently takes the armour from my hands. She takes off her gloves, then she picks up snow to wipe it clean and wash the grease off. All I can do is stare at her while she erases the signs of tragedy from the metal.

"What's the matter, Alistair?" Wynne puts her hand on my arm in a comforting gesture.

"I don't know. It just feels wrong to find this here, pawed over by darkspawn and thick with their rot. It was his." I shudder. More fodder for my nightmares. As if I didn't have enough to deal with already.

"I know, I feel it too," Wynne says soothingly. "But he is not the first king to ever fall in battle or ever the first to fall to the darkspawn."

"Yes, but this wound cuts deeper."

"And it will bleed longer."

So very true. Maybe it will never heal. Cailan wasn't as dear to me as Duncan... still. I can recall how sure he was that this would be the one glorious battle to end the Blight. But it wasn't glorious at all. Maybe battles never are. Maybe that's just what the storytellers make up. Cailan didn't deserve this treachery. I still cannot believe Loghain really did this. Why? Why would he murder his own king and son-in-law?

Having cleaned the armour, Rori returns it to me. Her fingers are red with cold. It looks painful and still she hasn't stopped until the armour was back to its shining gold. I know she did this to make me feel better. She also could have just left it the way it is and deal with it later.

"But we must keep moving; no doubt the darkspawn are eager to give us plenty more reasons to mourn," Wynne points out with a heavy sigh. Yes, we're all feeling pretty old these days.

We climb the slope that leads to the old temple where Rori survived the Joining. The goblet is lying in the snow like something useless cast away. Rori picks it up, turning it in her hands. Here it all began for her.

"This is where Daveth and Ser Jory died," she mumbles. I have never before heard her talk about them. "Here, take it. We will need it to recruit new Wardens." I am touched by her gesture. The goblet also was used when I joined the Grey Wardens. It's at least a bit of a tradition we have.

"What did you feel back then when Duncan handed you the goblet," I ask.

Rori doesn't have to think about the answer. "Fear. I was scared out of my mind. I thought I was going to die. Anger and regret. I so wanted to revenge my parents' death. But I wouldn't if I died. I
was pretty pissed of about that, I can tell you." I can't believe I never asked her before. I just didn't think about it. I feel a bit shaken by her confession. During my Joining I never doubted this was the right thing for me to do.

"But... you said you understand why the Grey Wardens keep their secrets."

"I did," Rori assures me. "Afterwards." She searches in my face for understanding but I'm afraid I cannot follow her. "When Duncan recruited me he asked my dying father's permission," Rori explains. "The last picture I have of my parents is my father lying in a puddle of his own blood and my mother cradling him in her arms." Her voice sounds choked when she unsuccessfully tries to fight back her tears. "They died believing I would be safe. During the Joining this felt like a betrayal. If I had to die, I'd rather have died defending my parents."

"I think, I understand." I was just glad I didn't have to become a templar. There was nothing to lose for me as living a life as a templar felt like being buried alive. Rori's is a totally different story. Who am I to judge her for her feelings?

"After the Joining, I understood that Duncan had to keep the truth from them. One because it was a mercy for my parents to believe I would live. Two because the Grey Wardens fight for a higher cause. Duncan couldn't consider personal feelings."

"But still you drank the darkspawn blood, despite your emotions." Although back than for a moment I feared she wouldn't dare.

She shrugs and sniffs. Does this girl never have a handkerchief in her pocket? I give her mine. Again. But I don't mind. I wipe her tears away gently before I hand it to her to blow her nose.

"An act of defiance. Just in case you haven't noticed yet, defiance often is my major reason to do things."

"And stubbornness," I add without thinking.

"Yes, that, too."

"Boldness."

"Probably."

"Bluntness."

"Hey!" She nudges my ribs. "Now I am beginning to wonder why you actually care about me."

"Because of all of that and more." I smile and she smiles back at me. "And because you look so hot in your armour."

"That does excite you? Women clad in leather?"

"Only one woman." I almost purr - but remember in time where we are. Ostagar. This is not the right place to fantasize about Rori being naked. I feel ashamed I did allow myself to forget about the tragedy surrounding us. I really should show more respect for the dead. For a very short moment I am even a little angry with Rori. But then I see the sorrow return to her eyes as if she has remembered like I have that this is neither the right time nor the right place for flirtations. I cannot blame her. How could I? Maybe it's a good sign she is able to bring light even to the blackest darkness.
We fight ourselves through another horde of darkspawn. Rori this time doesn't charge forward into the middle of a group of enemies, leaving the rest of us behind. She certainly has a way to detect the leader quickly, and I agree taking him down has a high priority - but not when you double your risk to die while trying.

"Well done," I praise her once we can sheathe our swords again. She beams at me so happily at my approval that it makes me laugh.

At the place where Cailan's tent stood we discover the chest. It is a very heavy metal chest and the scratches and bumps on it tell their own story of the darkspawn trying to break it open. They didn't succeed though. It's incredible they didn't manage. The lock does look as if it was easy to pick - at least that's what Rori says. And even if you couldn't pick it, have an ogre stomp on it and the chest should break.

"Probably magically protected," Wynne muses. "With the key you should be able to open it, otherwise there is no chance."

"Smart," Rori remarks as she inserts the key into the keyhole. She turns it and we all peep into the chest when she opens the lid. Carefully Rori takes the documents and we all put our heads together to read them.

"So it's true! He had convinced the forces of Orlais to ally against the darkspawn." Considering the history of Ferelden and Orlais this is almost a miracle.

"That's an incredible diplomatic achievement. It was a clever and brave thing to do. Father mentioned some diplomatic missions. He was Cailan's ambassador. Cailan was wiser than many thought him to be," Rori remarks. She quickly reads on. "It almost sounds as if they were... friends." She frowns as she reads the letters again.

"Empress Celene was merely awaiting his response!" Wynne cries out. We are all rather shocked - with Orlais's help the battle could have been won. If we had waited for them. If there had been time.

"Cailan offered to wait for the reinforcement from Orlais. Loghain was furious when he did so," Rori whispers, her voice choked. She took part in the last meeting before the battle. She is the only one to have heard Loghain explain his plan to Cailan - a plan that was meant to murder Cailan from the beginning.

"A response that never came and now never will, thanks to Loghain's treachery." I say bitterly.

Wynne pats my arm in that grandmotherly way of hers. "Never is a long time, Alistair. Give it time and let cooler heads prevail. There will be peace between us yet."

"Well I hope you live to see it, Wynne."

"And I hope the darkspawn don't."

"We can agree on that." Rori carefully folds the documents and puts them first into a waterproof skin, then into a leather satchel.

We move on across the bridge that leads to the tower of Ishal. We have the documents and some parts of Cailan's armour. The king himself is still missing. With all the snow I almost fear that we will never find him. Either the darkspawn took him and... ate him or whatever they do. Or he is there somewhere under the thick white blanket.

It's awfully early in the year for snow anyway. That's what the darkspawn does. At least Duncan
explained it to me that way. When there's a Blight, the sky turns grey and it becomes colder. And here it's so freezing cold that I already can hardly feel my toes.

Rori walks ahead of us, looking for traps. In the middle of the bridge she stops dead. Turning towards an upright stake, she falters. I can see it's a man hanging there but I can only make out who it is when I reach Rori.

At the sight of Cailan, I am thankful that it is so awfully cold. The way the darkspawn hung him there is horrible enough to look at. But the cold has conserved him. All of us have seen enough corpses swarmed by flies, their bodies bloated. But Cailan looks just like he has the day he died. And even now he's hung there, disgraced and humiliated in death, he still is a king, a fallen one but nonetheless royal in all his destroyed glory.

Rori, Wynne and I kneel in front of the crucified king, bowing our heads in respect before we move on. There's still too much darkspawn around here.

"Forgive us, my king. When we have driven the darkspawn from their holes and bought ourselves some time, we shall return to see you to the Maker."

Now we found Cailan I am also hoping we could find Duncan's body. Part of me is afraid to find him, part of me wants to pay my last respect to him. It would also end the uncertainty of what happened to him. Of course I know that he is dead. There's no lying to myself about that, no hope I could fool myself with.

"The Tower of Ishal... again," Rori sighs when we enter the tower and find it as unpleasant as the first time we came here. "And jam-packed with darkspawn... again."

"Having a bit of a déjà-vu?"

"You don't?"

"All the time, kitten, all the time."

At least this time we go down and not up. And there's no treacherous generals going to backstab us.

"Ugh. Down the hole and into the deep. I don't even want to imagine where that leads." I shudder.

"Me neither," Rori says gloomily.


Rori has a major fit when we get attacked by the giant spiders. She's shaking with disgust, shudders running through her even when we have left the cave behind. "Spiders, out of all creatures in Thedas, why did it have to be spiders!? Ewwww. I have cobwebs on my helmet. And armour. Ewwww."

"Aren't you glad you wear that helmet? Or all the cobwebs would be in your hair. Oh... no, no, don't be sick!" She looks all green and ashen.

"Can I... can I sit down here for a moment or two..." I help her take a seat on a nearby rock. She inhales deeply, trying to stop her hands from shaking. I knew she didn't like spiders from back in Lothering. But I didn't know it's that bad.

"Are... you alright?"
"Yeah, I'm fine. Let's go and kill some darkspawn. They at least have the proper amount of limbs."

Rori's wish is granted around the next corner. Here, at the destroyed gates, was the center of the battle. No sign of Duncan but we find his sword and dagger in the corpse of the ogre that rose from the dead only to be slain again.

"That belonged to Duncan, right?" Rori asks, when she sees me handling the blades with care. "But he isn't here... not like... Cailan. What do you think happened to him?"

"I really don't want to think about it, Rori."

"Oh, yeah, sorry." I squeeze her hand gently to tell her there's no offense taken.

"Just let's find the last piece of Cailan's armour and then get out of here. They had to make it hard for us and separate the damn pieces."

We find it a bit later on the Genlock Rori decapitated.

"There it is, the last of them." I am so relieved we can leave this awful place now. I never, never, never want to return here again. Somehow I hoped, returning to Ostagar and slaying the darkspawn here would help me getting over the loss of Duncan and the other Grey Wardens. It still feels awful. Even more so now when the place brings back all the memories once more. I do not need another reminder. I need rest.

Wynne sighs and stretches like an old cat. "It has been a long day. By the lines around your eyes I dare say you look as old as I."

"And if I may say so, milady, you appear to be getting younger by the day." There. She complained about me saying she is old and always has been. I can also be a gentleman if I choose to.

"Be careful who you flirt with, young man," the old mage chuckles. "When you wake up beside me tomorrow morning I'll be back to reminding you of your grandmother."

"Beside you?" I squeak. I'm feeling rather terrified right now. That's what I get for being nice. Can we please go back to killing darkspawn?

"You heard what I said. It would not be the first time I woke to a younger man in my bed."

Oh no! Now I have this image in my head of... Fire and Blight! That's really nothing I want to imagine... Get out of my head! Out! Now! "Are all women this evil and conniving when they grow old?"

"Just me, my dear," Wynne chuckles. "Just me."

I quickly hide behind Rori, making her stand in between me and that awful grandmother mage. All her granny-like attitude is nothing but a facade. She is evil! "You would defend me if I was in deathly danger, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, of course, why?" Rori frowns, confused.

"Just never ever leave me alone with Wynne."

"Oh... okay... Do I want to know what this is all about?"

"No, you don't."
We return to Cailan as promised. We are tired, hungry, freezing and emotionally drained. Still we cannot just leave him hanging there. Sten and I take him down. He's stiff and cold, deep frozen. It doesn't make it easier to handle him. I almost drop him when he comes down from the stake. Blast! He's heavy.

"Be careful you don't break his arms off accidentally," Wynne advices. I glare at her. I really don't want to hear anything like that anymore today. This is supposed to be a moment of respect.

We pile up a funeral pyre for him and set it on fire. I pray for him and Rori sings a dirge. I didn't know she has such a beautiful singing voice. I've never heard her sing before. It's as much as we can do for Cailan. My king. My brother.
Lamp-post in Winter

Shortly after leaving Ostagar, it begins to snow. First it's only soft flakes, covering the ground and with it the destruction and death like a thick white blanket. It's so silent, the only noises are our footsteps crunching in the snow and the rattling of Sten's and my armours. The peaceful moment is treacherous, though. A few miles down the road and we're in the middle of a blizzard. The wind howls and bites like an angry dragon, the snow stings like ice shards in our eyes and we struggle forward, sinking into the snow with every step we take.

"We have to hold each others hands or we'll get lost!" I shout to make myself heard against the storm. The road has disappeared. Everything is just white, no chance to see the horizon.

"We have to find shelter." Wynne's words are blown away by the wind as soon as they leave her mouth.

"Good idea, just where to find it? Back to Ostagar? We'll never make it that far."

"We have to be close to the camp. The tents won't give us much shelter but at least more than staying out in the open," Rori shouts. Her cheeks are burning red, her lips slightly blue.

"We will never find them in this blizzard." I look around for some place where we can light a fire and get warm. But I can't even make out Sten who's last in the row.

"We won't, but Barkley will." The Mabari woofs and when Rori tells him to find our companions, he runs off. We try to follow his footprints, as not moving seems like a very bad idea, but they soon are covered with snow. In the distance we hear Barkley bark.

"This way," Rori takes the lead, pulling me along into the direction of Barkley's barking. I hold on to her hand and to Wynne's. It is even more exhausting for her to walk through the snow. She often stumbles and I have to help her back to her feet. She doesn't complain, though. A tough old lady she is.

I almost feel like telling my companions I'm going to sit down and take a rest when Barkley's woofing becomes louder. Sten picks Wynne up and carries her like a child in one arm. Maker have mercy, let Barkley have found shelter for us or we're all going to die in this blizzard.

Rori cheers when the Mabari comes running towards us with long strides. It looks kinda funny because he disappears in the snow every time, only his ears sticking out. When he finally reaches us, the poor dog is gasping and hot despite the cold. He barks excitedly and we hurry to follow him as fast as we can.

And then right in front of us as if someone had pulled a curtain aside, there's the inn. There's light shining through the windows and without wasting a thought on who could be in there, we all burst through the door.

At the fireplace, wrapped in several blankets, sits Zevran. "Would you please close the door," is the first thing he says. "Fereldan weather is as cold as Fereldan women." He casts a pointy look at Leliana and Morrigan.

"Forget it, elf, nobody will warm your bed tonight," Morrigan hisses. She is standing next to the fire, stirring whatever is in the cauldron dangling above the flames. "Maybe you have better luck with the dog." Barkley snorts same time as Zevran.
Rori drops down in front of the fireplace. Her fingers are too stiff to even pull off her gloves. I'd help her but my hands won't function either. In the end it's Leliana to first wrap Wynne in another set of blankets and get her seated next to Zevran. Then she peels Rori, me and Sten out of our armours.

"This archdemon of yours is going to freeze to death. Blight over. World saved," Zevran slurs sourly once we all sit around the fire with a bowl of Morrigan's hot potato soup in our hands.

"At least the Crows won't come looking for you here," Rori points out when she helps herself to more soup.

"True, this is the most unlikely place I could ever be in." The elf already sounds far happier. His deal with Rori certainly is a win-situation for him. I am not sure yet if Rori will gain any profit.

We are lucky to have found this abandoned inn. The owners fled from the darkspawn and left anything back they could not carry. Ever since Redcliffe we didn't have such a comfortable stay. After dinner I sit in a corner, polishing my weapons and armour. Rori is trying to beat Zevran in a cards game. She stands no chance and soon has lost all of her money.

"I'm broke. End of game."

"Not necessarily," Zevran grins. "Do you know what strip-Wicked Grace is?" Of course she doesn't know. I don't either. "You discard one piece of clothing for every game you lose."

Watch your mouth, elf! I glower at him but it only seems to amuse him.

"Uhm... no, thanks," Rori refuses. Good girl.

"Why does nobody ever want to play with me?" Zevran sulks.

"Because you cheat," Morrigan points out, casting a look at him over the rim of that black book with the leaveless tree on the cover she has been reading lately.

Rori, still fully clothed, comes to sit beside me. She watches me tending my weapons but by the way she bites her lips and keeps wiggling around on the bench I can tell there's something on her mind.

"If you were raised in the Chantry, have you never...," Rori blurts out and then blushes, bites her lips and glances at me with huge round eyes.

Ahhh, so we're having that conversation now? You have to be a little more explicit, though, my dear. Asking me such questions, it feels a bit awkward. If she wasn't so obviously uncomfortable herself, I couldn't even stand looking her in the eyes now. Rori makes it easier in all her cutely embarrassed glory.

"Never? Never what? Had a good pair of shoes?" I'm not planning to go easy on her.

"You know what I mean..." She nudges my ribs, frowning at me, her frustration obvious. Hey, if you can't say it why do you think I can?

"I'm not so sure I do. Have I never seen a basilisk? Never ate jellied ham? Have I never licked a lamp post in winter?" I don't know where that comes from. Probably it's all the snow outside.

"Now you're making fun of me!" So much exasperation. You know me, Rori, that's how I am. You didn't expect anything else, did you? Well, maybe she didn't expect anything at all. She looks as if she wished she'd never brought this topic up.
"Make fun of you, dear lady? Perish that thought." The way she glares at me is utterly adorable. "Well, tell me, have you ever licked a lamp post in winter?" I give my voice a seductive quality, emphasizing every syllable. Never before have I made the word lamppost sound so dirty.

Rori blinks at me, dumbfounded for now. Hey, did she really think I wouldn't ask her, too? "No, I have never licked a lamp post in winter," she mumbles, her face lit with the most beautiful blush ever.

Well, she is a young but yet unmarried noble woman. She really shouldn't have licked any lampposts in her life. But, you never know. I doubt she's lying. Not the way she squirms as if she wishes for a hole in the ground to open and swallow her.

"Good. I hear it's quite painful. I remember one of the younger initiates did it on a dare, once, there was pointing and laughing, oh the humanity."

I can tell by the look on her face that she's wondering now if we actually really talk about the same. We do, Rori, we do. Don't worry about that. It's just not a topic I would be blunt about. And it seems even you have lost your bluntness here.

"I myself have also never done it. That. Not that I haven't thought about it of course. Especially when with Rori. She makes me have thoughts so sinful I'm expecting a lightning to strike me everytime I look at her. "But, you know..."

Am I relieved she never did that before? I don't know. I certainly cannot rely on her taking the lead here. She's as clueless as I am. Is this good? Of course I like the thought that I could be her first man. It also terrifies me. What if my performance doesn't satisfy her? And why in Andraste's name am I worrying about that now? I only have first kissed her yesterday!

"You never had the opportunity?"

"Well, living in the Chantry is not exactly for rambunctious boys. They taught me to be a gentleman. Especially in the presence of beautiful women such as yourself. That's not so bad, is it?"

"No, not bad at all." She smiles. "You think I am beautiful?"

Fishing for compliments now, are we? "Of course you are and you know it. I told you so before."

"I know but I like to hear you saying it," Rori purrs. She reminds me of a cat. One that has gotten the cream. I wouldn't be surprised if she stretched, rubbed her head at me and meowed.

"You are ravishing, resourceful and all those other things you'd probably hurt me for not saying."

"I would never hurt you!" Rori protests.

Ahh, I'm not too sure about that. She indeed has the tendency to hit me when I say something stupid. Not like beating me up, but better be careful with a woman with so much violent tendencies.

Of course I know that's not what she means. And I appreciate her saying so. It makes me feel safe around her. Safe to be who I am without having to watch my step and my mouth. Safe from any treachery or lies. Rori, I feel, will be honest with me in anything she does.

"Nor I you." That earns me a kiss to the tip of my nose and one of her brilliant smiles that makes her whole face shine, especially her eyes, these two beautiful pools of midnight blue.

"Especially not when you say things like that. There are worse things to say to a girl."
"For sure there are."

We sit there in silence for some time, both polishing our weapons, while we try to get over how awkwardly embarrassed we are. It's also cute, but, well, you know, confessing to a girl you like that you never have... licked a lamppost in winter... that's nothing you do everyday. Plus the last time I - accidentally - let slip that piece of information, it ended me with a whore my brothers in arms bought me. Not that I made use of her. I like to imagine my first time of lamppost-licking as something special and beautiful. Yes, I'm a romantic. I can't help it.

I clean Duncan's sword and dagger. It feels good that at least they could be retrieved. I still wish I could have done the same for Duncan as we did for Cailan. Well, I guess, it's not meant to be. Grey Wardens who feel the Calling also don't get a nice funeral. They fight the darkspawn in the Deep Roads until they fall and then... darkspawn fodder. It's sad but it's nothing I could change.

I can tell Rori isn't done yet. She still has something on her mind as she keeps glimpsing at me. If she doesn't watch out, she'll cut herself with her blades. You shouldn't be goggling your fellow Grey Warden when you handle sharp knives.

Finally she cannot stand it anymore. I'm surprised she actually managed to keep silent that long. "And what about kissing? Have you ever kissed before?" she blurts out.

"You want to know all the juicy details, don't you?"

"Blame me, I'm a curious girl." Her sheepish grin is making up for her nosiness. And to be honest, I'd like to know, too.

"You are. And to answer your question: Not really. Have you?"

"Well, I guess I have. But... not like that." Before I can ask her what 'not like that' could mean, she shows me. Wrapping her arms around my neck she claims my lips for a longlasting deep kiss. Thankfully she has put the dagger down before. With that boisterous passion of hers she has a tendency to pounce me. And I'd rather not have her carry any unsheathed blades then.

"I see," I gasp once she lets go of me. Good to know that kind of kissing is a premier for her, too. It makes me feel so... special. Out of all men in Thedas this beautiful, sassy and clever woman chose me. Someone please pinch me. It feels like a dream. "So what was it like then?"

Rori snuggles comfortably against me before she begins to tell her tale. I nuzzle her hair. Oh, that fresh scent of verbena! I so like the feeling of her in my arms. What have I been missing all that time that I wasted due to the lack of opportunity? However, if I had had more opportunities then would Rori still be as special to me as she is? And would I have wanted any opportunities if they were not with Rori?

"Well, the first time I lost a bet and had to kiss Ser Gilmore," Rori holds up her hand to count down her kissing experience.

I don't know Ser Gilmore but I instantly can't stand him.

"I was eight then and Ser Gilmore wasn't a Ser of course. He was ten and I think it was even worse for him than it was for me. All the other knaves made jokes about him and me for at least half a year. And it wasn't a real kiss. We were kids. I had to chase him around the table for ten minutes and corner him until I got to kiss him while he tried to fight me off."

Awww, isn't that cute? I think I can pardon Ser Gilmore. He's not such a bad guy after all.
"The second one was Vaughan Kendells."

What!? That deviant? I really thought Rori has a better taste in men. After all she has me and I am not at all like Vaughan. Oh, wait... Knowing Vaughan this is nothing I will like once I hear it.

"Arl Kendells and my parents obviously thought he and I could marry." Rori snorts loudly. Obviously she didn't share their opinion. I could have told her parents it was a very very bad idea indeed. "Well, Vaughan tried to be nice in front of everbody and then took me for a walk. I didn't want to go but Mother said it would be rude. So we walked and then suddenly he threw me at a wall, grabbed me by the throat and shoved his tongue into my mouth. Ewwww!" Rori shudders and pulls a face like she has just bitten into something rotten. I can't blame her. I am equally disgusted. Vaughan Kendells is dead meat. If I ever meet that prick again, he'll die. I swear he will.

"What did you do to him?" I cannot believe Rori just let this happen. And I am looking forward to hear of the punishment Vaughan received and deserved.

"I bit his tongue, rammed my knee between his legs and shoved him down the stairs. I think he learnt his lesson," she says with grim satisfaction.

With her he did but with all the stories I've heard about him, he has to meet a hundred more women like Rori before he might even consider to change.

"Then there was that awful old geezer Bann Ceorlic. He tried to grope and smooch me. Barkley locked jaws with his lower backside."

"Oh, I wish I could have seen that! Such a good dog!"

"It was priceless! Ceorlic couldn't sit for almost a year after that." Rori giggles. At least she can see the funny side of being molested.

"I am beginning to feel quite lucky that I got to kiss you without having been beaten up and attacked by an angry mabari." And I am beginning to feel that I have to write a list of people to deal with. Top of the list: Loghain MacTir. But Vaughan Kendells and Bann Ceorlic have just made it there right below. Of course there's also Arl Howe. But I'd never steal Rori's revenge - although I'd happily skin that blasted bastard alive if she asked me to.

"What about..." I search for the name she once mentioned, the bastard she had a crush on. "Curtis?"

"Oh, Curtis didn't care about me."

"But you said you liked him?" I am confused. I cannot understand how anybody could not like Rori. She is adorable from head to toe.

"I did. But Curtis was more into girls like Delilah Howe. He said I'm not a real girl."

"You are a real girl." For sure she is. She has everything a real girl needs and the right amount of it in all the right places.

"Real girls wear pretty fancy clothes and pretty uncomfortable shoes they can't walk in. That's why they always need a man to lean on. They have perfumed handkerchiefs with lace and faint whenever there's something exciting happening. Real girls scream for help and wait to be rescued. They for sure don't beat up guys like Vaughan." She shrugs. "At least that's what Curtis thought to be real girls. Anyway, he was more into Delilah and I... well, I don't think he really noticed me."
Curtis for sure is the biggest idiot in Thedas.
The weather doesn't change the next day, so when I find a set of toy soldiers with little horses and a wooden fortress, I use them to teach Rori some tactics.

"Awww, has the little boy found some toys!" Morrigan sneers when I put the soldiers onto the biggest table in the main room of the inn.

"Yes, and the evil witch will come play with him," I retort. When Zevran begins to snicker and by the look on Morrigan's face I figure I might have said something awkward. "Err... anyway tactic lessons!"

Most of the day Rori and I spend pushing soldiers around on the table. I give her different problems to solve and explain to her different battle moves. Sten sits besides us, watching the game. He grunts from time to time - which I guess is a sign of approval.

For supper we clear the table and afterwards Rori, her dog and I look after the horses in the stable. The snow has turned the landscape into a winter wonderland. The blizzard has slowed down to a soft snowfall and the sun peeps through the clouds. The air is fresh and clear. It's hard to believe there's a Blight taking place when you see all that peaceful beauty. At least as long as you don't know it's summer actually.

I just stand there and breathe and allow myself a moment of rest... until suddenly something cold hits the back of my neck. Some of it slides down my collar and makes me shudder.

"Hey!" I spin round to see Rori has already piled up a supply of snowball munition. "Sneaky little brat!" She giggles and throws the next snowball at me, hitting my shoulder. "Oh you so will regret this!" As she has already made so many snowballs and I have none, I charge. Rori squeals and runs. I chase her around the huge oak tree in the courtyard - Barkley always at my heels -, trying to catch her - until she escapes into the tree, climbing it as easily as a squirrel.

"Catch me if you can!" Rori challenges me. When I start to climb the tree, she rustles the branches and I get showered with snow. Oh I so will get back on her for that. I'm halfway up when she jumps off the tree. So I let myself drop down and am there to block her path when she darts away.

"Gotcha!"

She shrieks when I wrap my arm around her waist from behind and swirl her around, pushing her down to lie in the snow. She tries to kick me off but I'm too heavy - and at least smart enough to catch her wrists in my hand and push her arms over her head. Now she's pinned helplessly beneath me. She squirms and bucks but there's no way out for her. Not unless she intends to hurt me and I hope she doesn't. Then I thoroughly rub her face with snow until its all red. She truly deserves that.

"Stop! Stop!" Rori cries. She has such a gigglefit she can hardly breathe.

"You are adorable," I mumble, leaning in to kiss her once she can breathe normally again. She returns the kiss with her own hungry passion, stirring mine with hers.

As much as I hate to but that's when it's time to break the kiss and help her back to her feet. I so hope she doesn't notice the bulge in my pants. I need this to proceed slowly. It's nothing I have ever done before and I feel overwhelmed by the turmoil of emotions she causes inside of me. She seems much more at ease than I am with the situation. After I have made the first move, Rori is setting a pace, I'm not sure I can follow.
I have just brought her back to her feet when the door opens for Zevran and Leliana. The elf is wrapped in a coat too big for him and has put a wollen cap on that makes him look like a gnome. Obviously he and Leliana have rummaged through the wardrobes and drawers in the inn.

"Having all the fun without us, have you?" Zevran asks.

As if I let him take part in Rori's and my fun!

"I've never had the chance for a snowball fight. It doesn't snow in Antiva. But it looked like a lot of fun. Rori, you and Alistair against Leliana and me?"

Ohhh! Snowballs! And I thought he was talking about... well, never mind.

"I'm in," Rori accepts the challenge. We agree on a time for preparation before the battle starts and Rori and I quickly build our snowfortress and make as many snowballs as possible.

Morrigan comes to watch us. Even she wears a coat. It's a change I can only appreciate.

"Hey, Morrigan, come join us," Rori invites her. I am tempted to rub her face with snow again.

"I do not take part in your childish..." SMACK! Zevran's snowball hits the side of her head. "OW! YOU! ELF! Prepare to die!" She snatches a snowball from my hand. "Any rules I should know of?" she snarls.

"Uhm... no dead, no seriously hurt?" Rori offers.

"Hmph. What a waste of time!"

"That's unfair!" Leliana cries. "You are three against two!"

"Not when you count me in," Wynne declares.

"Whoa, Wynne, aren't you a bit old for...?" I start. Then her snowball hits me straight in the face. I gurgle and spit snow.

"Now, that made my day," Morrigan remarks.

We fight until dusk and when we get back into the house, we're all utterly spent, hungry and freezing. Sten is waiting for us with dinner. He glares at us as if he was wondering how he could end up with such a bunch of nutcases.

"Missing your cage in Lothering?" I ask.

"In moments like this I do."

After dinner I am so tired the only thing I want to do is crawl into my bed and sleep. I want to kiss Rori goognight but she has something on her mind. "Can I talk to you?"

"More juicy details you want to know about?" I ask with a smile, wrapping my arms around her waist to pull her closer.

"No... well, I certainly would like to know. But this is about Flemeth."

I let go of Rori. So this is not a cuddling moment. "What about her?"

"I have to kill her."
"What? Why?" Not that I object. She is the Witch of the Wilds and although she appears to be an old woman, she is still dangerous.

"I promised Morrigan to do it," Rori groans. She doesn't look happy about that at all.

"Now, this is a longer story, isn't it?" That much for going to bed early.

"I'll make it short. Morrigan found a book in the Tower of Magi. She thought it to be Flemeth's lost grimoire but it turned out to be a detailed description of how Flemeth survived all these centuries. The book describes how when she feels her body growing old, she raises a daughter. And when time has come she possesses that daughter and lives on in her body."

"I'm in." I don't even have to think about that.

"You will help me kill her?" Rori seems surprised I am so easily convinced.

"Of course! An evil witch possessing bodies! You didn't forget I almost became a templar, did you?"

"Well, but this is for Morrigan," Rori points out.

"It doesn't matter to me who Flemeth wants to possess. This is so wrong. I cannot let it happen. If she cannot get Morrigan, she'll get someone else. And I doubt Morrigan's character will improve if replaced by Flemeth's."

"I feel sorry for Morrigan. She's so upset."

"If this is true, she has every reason to be upset." But feeling sorry for her? I just can't bring myself to go that far. "She still is an evil bitch. And mean."

Rori doesn't try to convince me of anything else. She knows too well Morrigan and I will never become friends. "She grew up all alone with only Flemeth in the Wilds. Her mother used her as a bait to lure templars into the Wilds when Morrigan was a little girl. She told me. I feel like she never stood much of a chance to not turn out as she did. She never had any other children to play with, no friends, only a mother who raised her for one reason alone."

"Why would Flemeth send her away then?" It doesn't make sense, does it?

"I asked the same question. Morrigan says she doesn't know. She guesses that if she becomes more powerful, possessing her body could become easier for Flemeth."

"Do you believe that's the real reason?"

"No."

"Then what do you believe?"

"Flemeth didn't rescue us simply because of the Blight. She couldn't care less. She could go anywhere else. She had yet another reason for this and whatever reason this was, Morrigan is part of her plan. I'm unsure, though, if Morrigan knows."

"Then why keep her around?"

"I haven't yet given up that I can find out what this is all about. And killing Flemeth could end the plans she has with us or the Blight or whatever it is she is after."

"Quite an optimist, aren't you?"
"Look at what we are trying to do! If I wasn't optimistic the mere thought of what lies ahead of us would make me give up at once. And tomorrow, we optimistically will kill Flemeth." She kisses me softly. "Good night, Alistair."

The next morning I'm in my bedroom at the inn, packing my things for Mission Flemeth when I overhear a conversation between Rori and Zevran right in front of my slightly open door. I can see them through the crack. Zevran doesn't look pleased when he confronts Rori.

"So, you are going to leave me back here, again. Have you only saved me to condemn me to neverending boredom?" the elf complains. He doesn't sound happy at all. The last thing I want to have around is an unhappy and bored assassin. He could get strange ideas as how to make his life more exciting. "You don't trust me. Or why wouldn't you choose me for this mission?"

"But, Zevran, it's cold outside!" Rori cries as if that was an explanation at all.

"So?" Zevran crosses his arms in front of his chest.

"We wouldn't want your cute pointy ears to freeze off, would we?" she coos.

She thinks his ears are cute?

"You think my ears are cute?"

"That's what I said, didn't I?"

I can't believe she said that!

"You do know that ears are an erogenous zone, don't you?" Zevran purrs, taking one step forward to close the space between himself and Rori. She evasively retreats to keep her distance, now standing with her back against the wall. Zevran, like all elves, isn't very tall but still at least a bit taller than Rori. Resting one hand at the wall, he leans closer and smiles seductively at her.

If I didn't know she can perfectly handle herself, I'd be out there by now to turn Zevran into a bloody pulp not even his mother would recognize.

Unless of course that's what she wants... She's quite flirtatious with Zevran The mere thought... hurts.

"They are what?" Rori asks, confused.

"Oh, how sweet, you're as woo-less as our mutual friend Alistair, aren't you?" the elf chuckles and straightens, giving Rori some more room.

I should have never asked Zevran for advice about wooing a woman. Never. Big mistake.

"Uhm..."

"My beautiful Fereldan rose, ears are highly sensitive."

"Your ears?" Rori sounds as if she's unsure what he is actually talking about.

"All kinds of ears as far as I know," Zevran offers nonchalantly. "At least those I have nibbled and sucked at. And that's a great deal of ears if I may say so."

"You suck and nibble ears?"

That's also new to me.
"Earlobes mostly. It's highly erotic. You nibble, you suck, trace the outline of the ear with the tip of your tongue. Oh, what a pleasure! Don't slurp though, nobody wants someone else's drool in their ears."

"No slurping..."

"Yeah, you get it."

Pause. "I take it you have licked a whole lot of lampposts in winter, right?" Rori inquires. What does she sound like? Amused? Excited? I suddenly feel awfully insecure due to my lack of experience. A woman rather would have a man who knows what to do, right?

"What? Why in the name of the Maker should I lick a lamppost in winter?"

"Never mind."

"Fereldans are so weird."

"If you say so."

"Oh my beautiful saviour, you need me more than you know."

"Do I?"

Does she?

"Oh yes, you do. Believe me, Zevran knows a lot of things you are absolutely clueless about. And there will be a time when you seek my advice." According to the look on Rori's face it's more likely for Andraste's flaming sword to freeze over. That's somewhat relieving. "So, I will stay here at the inn and wait for your return as you wish. Don't get yourself killed. It would be such a waste to see you returned to the Maker unopened."

"Unopened?" Rori echoes.

"Without your cherry popped, my lovely."

"My cherry?... Oh, forget it, I don't want to know!"

"As you wish." Zevran chuckles, bows and disappears from my sight. Right after he's gone there's a knock at my door and Rori pokes her head in. She beams when she sees me.

"Good morning," I greet her, maybe a little bit cooler than I intend to. I am too confused right now. I don't know what to make of Rori's behaviour towards Zevran. "I'm almost packed. We can be on our way to slay the evil witch in no time at all and then go back to..."

Rori has come to stand right in front of me. She tilts her head back and examines my face, then lifts her hand to trail her fingers gently across the outline of my right ear, following my jawline and down the hollow of my throat. I swallow hard.

"Or we could all just hold our hands and dance ring-a-ring-a-roses with Flemeth and the Archdemon and forget all about that awful killing business."

"Mmmmm," Rori purrs, repeating her caress with my left ear. Maker's Breath!

"You're not really listening, are you?" I manage to gasp.
"Hm?" she blinks at me. "What did you say?"
Ding-Dong! The Witch is Dead!

Oh that bloody blasted dragon! There's not a single spot on my body that does not hurt. Cuts, burns, blisters - and a broken shield arm - again. I wiggle around uncomfortably and pull at the bandage at my arm. The itching is killing me. I have to scratch it. "Ow!"

"What? Stop fussing with it. You'll make it worse." Wynne glares at me and swats my hand away. She has done everything she could and still we had to stay another two days at the inn until we were able to move on.

Rori has a serious concussion. It's not very healthy to get sent flying by a dragon tail and hit a wall. Wynne says without the helmet I make her wear, she'd be dead. Sten has several broken ribs and a broken nose. But he has not once as much as groaned. Creepy! He just sits there silently with closed eyes, unmoving like a statue. Do Qunaris feel no pain? Rori and I groan and moan, we whimper and whine, we complain, sulk and pout. But Sten? Not a sound.

"It itches," I complain sulkily.

"Yes, it's healing. Don't touch it." Wynne scolds.

"But it's distracting," I whine, rubbing the bandage to ease the uncomfortable itching. "Can I rub it through the bandage? That's not really scratching."

"Alistair," she says sternly, "if you open that wound up, I'm not going to heal it again. You can just treat it yourself. And if it festers, weeping bloody pus and burns like the flames of Andraste's pyre, don't come to me. All I'm going to say is: 'Alistair, didn't I tell you not to touch it?''

I stop rubbing the bandage. "It won't really fester, will it?"

"Why don't you try scratching and see?"

"I... uh, I guess it doesn't itch so much now." I take my hand of the bandage. It's not the only one I wear. And they are all itching! Wynne said she has done whatever she could do but magic can only do as much and nature has to help. I wish nature would hurry. It's unbearable to wear any armour. Sleep only conquers me when I'm close to fainting. The pain keeps me awake. It's not like it hurts in a way I'd call agony. It's just... distracting, you see. And it drives me mad.

Rori comes to sit next to me. Wynne glares at her pointedly. She told her a thousand times she should rest. "It's so boring all alone in my tent," Rori complains. "Can't I rest here?"

"Stop behaving like babies, both of you," Wynne growls. "I have better things to do than pamper you."

"Yes, granny," Rori and I blurt out in unison.

Wynne sighs, shakes her head and walks off to treat Sten's wounds.

"How are you?" I ask Rori. She rests her head against my shoulder but removes it when I wince.

"My head is still spinning. But at least I don't get sick anymore." She starts rubbing a wound on her arm through the bandage.

"Don't," I say and take her hand in mine.
"But it itches!"

"It does, doesn't it?" I laugh and whimper when a sharp pain seems to pierce my face. Argh, I forgot about the burns and cuts in my face. I lift my hand to touch the cut on my forehead but decide I'd better not when I catch Wynne stare.

"Where does it hurt most?" Rori asks.

"Here." I point at the cut I was about to rub. Rori scrambles to her knees and leans in, gently, oh so gently kissing the wound.

"And here." I point at a burn right beneath my cheekbone and she brushes her lips across it. "Here, too." I lift my chin for her to kiss it. "And here." My fingers move to my lips. I can hear Rori smile. Not touching anything but my lips, she kisses me. I wouldn't believe it if I didn't feel it, but the sensation of her soft touch, her lips on mine, tongues mingling in a velvet dance, it erases all the pain and itching.

When we break apart, Rori smiles at me. She has a lot of bruises and cuts herself. We both aren't the epitome of prettiness at the moment. To me she still is the most beautiful creature I have ever laid my eyes upon. Wynne is watching us across the fire. I didn't know anybody paid any attention to Rori kissing me. I don't want any audience. Rori couldn't care less. She just kisses me whenever she feels she needs to, no matter who is watching. I can't read Wynne's expression. It's something in between serious and sad as if there's something bothering her.

When Rori lays down beside me, she rests her head in my lap and I let her because that's probably the only part of my body where I do not hurt. I gently run my fingers through the soft strands of her short dark red hair. It has grown a bit longer since I first met her in Ostagar. I wrap one curl around my finger. With long hair she has to have a mane of wild curls as untamed as herself.

After some more days of resting, we're on the road again, finally heading towards Denerim. Our wounds have healed enough to allow us to pick up pace. I try to make some conversation with Sten...

"Don't you ever talk? You know, make polite conversation just to put people at ease?" I inquire curiously. The grumpy Qunari hardly ever says anything at all - and when he does it's a complaint. Maybe he's just shy?

"You mean that I should remark upon the weather before I cut off a man's head?" Sten says in his monotonous voice.

"Nevermind." Oookay, I'd call that a major failure. Creepy fellow. Though, maybe that's not that bad after all. I wish Morrigan would be as silent.

In front of us Rori and Wynne are lost in conversation. As Sten prefers silence, I entertain myself by watching Rori's swaying hips as she walks. Her leather armor clings to her like a second skin. I wonder if she minded if, next time I kiss her - and when nobody is around to spy - I dared to cup her buttocks and maybe squeeze them a little or if she punched me for groping her. I'm not sure, but I might give it a try anyway. I am the adventurous type it seems.

"Draw your weapon."

Huh? What? Maker's Breath, he talks! "Are you talking to me?"

"Your weapon. Draw it." Sten's glare pierces me as if it was a weapon of its own.
I am confused. What does he want of me? "Why? Are we under attack?"

"I want to see what you can do."

"You want to fight me? Just like that?" Really, he is a strange guy. Why would he want to fight me?

"You are a Grey Warden. How are you going to face an archdemon if you cannot face me?"

"It is a mystery, I'll admit." Right now I can't believe the archdemon to be any scarier than Sten. I wish he'd go back to his silence.

"I should let your weakness damn us all? Draw your sword. I'll try not to injure you permanently."

"I don't have to prove anything to you. Forget it," I snort and leave him standing there. If he wants to have a fight, he can wait for the next darkspawn. It's not as if we're going to run out of them soon.

"So you do have a spine. Pity you don't use it."

I am still thinking of a smart reply when Rori, the very moment her conversation with Wynne ends, turns on her heel, runs towards me and pounces. She throws herself at me and kisses me feverishly, almost desperately. It's not like the kisses we shared before. There's an urgency in it that makes me wonder what is wrong. When we break the kiss, we both are breathless. Rori clutches my armour as if I was going to dissolve should she let go. There is fear in her huge dark blue eyes.

"Rori, what is wrong?"

"Nothing," she whispers, then hugs me tightly. When wearing a suit of plate armour, hugging is more like clinking two cans together. Though her studded leather armor makes it less exciting to hold her I still can feel her tension.

"Nothing did get you so upset? What did Wynne say to you?"

"Nothing."

"Rori!" Now I am worried.

"Nothing of importance." She won't tell me no more and silences me with another kiss. The rest of the way she stays at my side, holding my hand while we walk. I am determined to find out what is bothering her so i corner Wynne as soon as we set up camp for the night and Rori leaves with Leliana for a bath in the nearby lake.

"What did you say to her, Wynne?" I demand to know.

"Why don't you ask her?" Wynne doesn't have to ask who I talk about. She pretty sure knows my concerns are about Rori only.

"She said it was nothing of importance."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because she is upset. How could nothing upset her?" I snarl. Wynne's calm manner drives me mad. I had a trembling girl kissing me as if it was the last thing she'd do in her life. My girl. And I want to know why she did this.

"Alistair, Rori is perfectly capable of taking care of herself. You don't need to worry about her."
I snort. "Everybody keeps telling me that she can take care of herself. And at the same time they say I cannot."

"Take care of yourself or of her?"

"Both, I guess."

"She does not need you. She is strong. She has a great task ahead of her. She is the one to unite Ferelden, raise an army and end the Blight. It is her duty and she shouldn't get distracted by anything else."

"Rori is a very young woman, hardly more than a girl. She is burdened with more than she could possibly carry alone. I think you are wrong. Not about her being strong but about her needing nobody. Not needing me. Is that what you told her? No wonder she got upset."

"You are very protective about her." Wynne observes calmly. Her blue eyes never cease watching me intently. It's rather unnerving.

"For sure I am. She's our leader as you pointed out."

"And you care about her."

"That's rather obvious, isn't it?" I sound defiant. Why does she have to make this complicated? I can't see what's wrong about me caring about Rori. And still I feel like I have to defend myself.

"Alistair, have you ever wondered where this will lead? One day you could have to decide between your duty and your love. What if you had to choose between saving her or saving us all? What if she had to make that choice? What are you going to do then?"

"That's a ridiculous question! Morrigan asked me the same and it hasn't become any less ridiculous just because it's you asking it."

"Why so angry, Alistair? Maybe it's because of the truth behind my question, a truth you do not want to see?"

"There is no truth as there cannot be a choice. We fight the Blight. Not ending it will kill us all. That's Rori's and my duty. That's how I protect her and all the rest of Ferelden. How can there be a choice?"

"What if you became king?"

"That's very unlikely. It won't happen."

"It could happen, and you know it."

"But it hasn't happened yet. And if I got anything to say about it, it won't happen." I storm off into the forest, fetching my pike on my way. I need some time alone. I need some space. I need to work the anger and frustration out of my mind. Now I understand why Rori was so upset. Her answer must have been similar to mine considering how she kissed me afterwards. Or was it her kissing me goodbye? The mere thought makes my heart contort painfully. No, that's not it. If Rori was to end things she'd do it face to face straightforward and quickly. She would never leave me guessing. That's not how she is.

The ongoing battle, our brushes with death, all the tragedies... Rori is like a ray of light in the darkness. She makes me happy. She keeps my spirits high. She gives me hope. I don't want to lose
her but I am not that stupid to not realize it could happen... but... if I don't accept this little bit of happiness I am allowed to feel...
Overwhelmed

Furiously I swat at low branches and tree trunks with my pike on my way deeper into the forest. I run until my body is covered in sweat and my heart is pounding so hard, it feels like it's going to jump out of my chest. I am upset, confused. I don't know what to believe. I don't know what to feel. Ever since the battle of Ostagar I've been lost in a turmoil of emotions, sadness, sorrow, regret, despair and hope, moments of happiness, moments when I believe there's a future lying ahead. And then everything comes crashing down on me again.

Coming to a halt, I bend, my hands resting on my knees. Blood is rushing into my head and the beating of my heart is deafening any other sound. My breathing is ragged but I finally manage to calm down. Slumping down to rest my back at a tree, I close my eyes, wishing the images that pop up in my mind everytime I do so would stop. I see Duncan and Cailan. Arl Eamon and Teagan. Loghain. My fellow Wardens. And Rori above all of them.

I refuse to think about what Wynne said. Yes, I am being defiant. Maybe... maybe she's right? Maybe not. If I only could figure what I truly feel.

A rustling of branches alerts me. I squint my eyes, trying to make out what it is that moves in the twilight of the forest. My fist clenches around my pike as I rise silently. The rustling stops and a short woof announces Barkley. Only shortly later he bursts through the bushes, wagging his tail when he sees me.

"Did Rori send you?"

"Woof!"

I wonder why she hasn't come searching for me herself. Doubt creeps back into my mind. What am I doing here? Is this the right thing to do? Is this what Duncan would have done? Errr... forget about that last thought. Now I'm having images of Duncan and Rori in my head. He could be her father! I totally hate it when my mind does things like that to me. Duncan didn't disapprove when I admitted I was flirting with Rori back in Ostagar. Maker's Breath, that seems so long ago now. The Grey Wardens aren't like the Chantry. But would he still have said the same if he had known it would be only the two of us to face the Blight? I have no idea.

Barkley is hopping around me expectantly. He makes a few steps towards the path, waits for me to follow and when I don't, he returns and tries pulling me with him by biting my shirt.

Whoa! Slowly!" I'm not going to let myself be ordered around by a dog. Even though Morrigan thinks the dog is smarter than me. "Is she worried I could get lost?"

"Woof!"

"Well, I guess I should return to the camp then before she sends Morrigan after me."

"Woof!"

Rori awaits me at the campfire. The others have gone to bed already. It's late and she must have switched watch with Leliana and Zevran to be still here.

"You found him. Good boy." She pets the dog and gives him one of his cookies before she turns to me and hugs me tight. I wrap my arms around her waist, my mouth finds hers and we kiss.
It starts rather innocently. But before I know what's happening we're on the ground together, Rori sits in my lap, straddling me. Kisses grow more urgent, almost feverish. I can feel her hands roam my body. Hesitantly first she rubs my back, then slips her hands under my shirt and I shudder at the sensation of her fingers on my skin. Her mouth leaves mine, trailing kisses across my jawline, then gently nibbling my earlobe. I gasp at the sensation when she puts anything Zevran told her about ears into action. She certainly remembers well - and I have to give the elf credit, he wasn't lying about ears being rather sensitive. Rori shifts in my lap and I hear someone moan: "Oh, Andraste, help me!"

Oh, blast! That was me.

I have no idea what I am doing. My hands move on their own accord, cupping her firm little buttocks. I can feel the heat of her core through the fabric of the leatherpants that we both still wear. Or maybe it's just my own heat. How should I know? I am about to lose my mind. This is so overwhelming it's hardly bearable.

My mind is weirdly quiet and at the same time I am frantic. I cannot come up with one coherent thought and I probably have lost the ability of speech altogether. All I can do is moan. It's as if my body is possessed. How else could I dare to slide my hands under her shirt, roam them across the flat of her belly, upwards to the soft mounds of her breasts.

Rori arches her back when I cup her breasts, leaning into the touch. I cannot believe I am doing this! A tiny voice in the back of my head screams at me and is drowned by Rori's moans of pleasure when my thumbs rub across her nipples. I am astonished at how they harden to become little pebbles under my assault.

STOP!

I withdraw my hands. My breathing is as ragged as Rori's, my body tense, nerves tingling. I gulp hard, trying to calm myself down. Blast! How could this get so out of control?

"Rori..." I so don't sound like myself.

"So," Rori begins timidly. She inhales deeply, closing her eyes. A shiver runs through her. She clears her throat and manages to speak without her voice shaking. It sounds husky. "How would you like to join me in my tent?" Her fingertips whisper across my chest.

I freeze. "Your tent. Ah..."

"No?" Suddenly her voice sounds so small. She looks at me almost frightened.

No, I don't want her to feel hurt about that. I take Rori's hands in mine. Now I only have to beat my tongue into forming real words. "I know most guys would probably leap at the chance to be with you but... I don't know if I'm ready for that. It's a big step." I've never done this. She has never done this. Merciful Andraste, I'd deflower her if I accepted! And myself in some way, too. That's a mighty big step. I want her but at the same time I am scared. And of course I know this wouldn't be the right thing to do, to take advantage of her.

I have to remove her from my lap before I forget what's the right thing to do. And I have to do it in a way that does not hurt her more than I've already managed. She looks as if I slapped her. Gently I push her away from me and rise, making her stand with me. I don't let go of her hands. One because I want her to see this is not about her. Two because I need to make sure my hands are occupied with something. "I guess that makes me sound like an idiot. I mean... turn down an incredible woman like you? I have to be." I laugh uneasily.
She tilts her head to one side, watching me intently. Her own expression has changed, she's confused but the frightened look has disappeared. She seems calmer now. "Oh, I think it's cute."

So it's that bad, right? I'm not only an idiot but a cute idiot. I probably deserve that for what I just did. "Just what every man wants to hear."

"Don't worry, Alistair, it's okay." She tries to hide behind cheerfulness but I can now tell for sure she's profoundly confused.

"I guess I was just raised not to take this kind of thing lightly. I hope that doesn't put you off." Actually I was taught you marry a woman before you spend the night with her as not to dishonour her. And I am not sure about that. How could I after such short a time? Actually, the things we've already... done... only a moment ago. That's probably more than should be allowed before getting married.

And for her first time - my first time - I'd like things to be perfect. The right time and the right place, not some hurried encounter in a tent in the middle of nowhere.

"Alright so. Now I've handled that with my usual deft brilliance it's time to move on. And take a cold bath maybe."

At least that makes Rori giggle. For a few moments we just stand there, looking into each others eyes. "Shouldn't you let go of my hands now?" Rori finally asks. I haven't even noticed I was still holding them.

"Oh, of course, I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. Not on your side. I... I think I should be going... uhm... to my tent now..." She bites her lips, then offers a sheepish grin before she tiptoes to kiss my cheek.

I still stand there when she walks off, muttering something under her breath. It sounds as if she's calling herself a complete idiot. I close my eyes and not for the first time wish I could turn back time and erase all these awkward moments from my life. I have to do something... anything... to make this right again.

"Rori..." I call after her.

"Yes?" Maker, she sounds so timid. Pausing outside the circle of light the fire spreads, she turns back to me, her arms tightly wrapped around herself.

"I... I care for you so much. whenever I think of this I feel like a bumbling idiot, all hands. I... wish I could be better at this... I want it to be right... I want... oh blast it!"

"I understand, Alistair." Then why does she sound as if she were crying? Blast! Blast! Blast! "Goodnight." I watch her leave, the distance between us growing wider with every step she takes before the darkness swallows her and she's gone.

Later I lie in my tent, staring at the ceiling, too upset to sleep. Outside Leliana sits at the campfire during her watch and hums softly. It's soothing and I listen, hoping her song will lull me to sleep. Suddenly when I almost managed to fall asleep, she stops.

"Rori, what's wrong, sweetheart?"

And I'm wide awake again.
"Nothing."

"You don't look like nothing."

"It's... I'm just feeling quite awkward, that's all."

I know I shouldn't be eavesdropping but it's absolutely impossible not to listen to them. I could stick my fingers into my ears and sing to myself. That would work. But I stay immobile. I even hold my breath.

"And why would you feel awkward? Come on, we're friends, you know you can tell me." Pause. 
"Alright, let me have a guess: It's about Alistair."

Rori lets out a deep breath. "Tonight I... I asked him... asked... well, I asked him if he wanted to join me..." Her last words fade into an inaudible whisper.

"And he didn't react as you thought he would."

"He turned me down." Blast! She sounds so meek.

"Maybe he lacks the proper parts?" Leliana suggests - and she means it.

HEY!

"NO!"

Thank you, Rori. Why so many jump to the conclusion that a man cannot perform the act just because he doesn't welcome any opporunity given is totally beyond me.

"He's as well... uhm.. equipped as he should be... as far as I can judge that." I can hear her blush a deep crimson. Just like I do. This is awkwardly embarrassing. There's two women sitting outside my tent discussing the proportions of my most private parts!

"Then how did he explain? He did give an explanation, didn't he?"

"He said he didn't feel ready, that it was a big step and that he was raised to take things like that serious." I cannot see her but I know Rori well enough to know she has plucked a blade of grass and now tears it to tiny pieces. She does that when she's nervous and doesn't know what to do with her hands.

"AWWWWWWWWWWW!" Leliana squeals and claps her hands. "How CUTE!"

Yeah. Cute.

"You don't think it's really about me?"

NO! No, Rori, please don't think that! Oh, what have I done?

"No, sweetheart, Alistair is a gentleman, " Leliana rushes to my defense. "Something very rare and precious. He wouldn't just use and discard you. He really takes this serious and the moment he asks you, you can be sure he still will be with you the next morning."

"Oh, he now has to think I'm a whore!" Rori wails. Tears well up in her eyes, I know by the sound of her voice. "I feel like a complete idiot!"

No, no, I could never think that of her! And the idiot, that's me.
"Alistair would never think so low of you."

Bless that bard!

"Don't worry, honey. You both worry too much that things won't proceed naturally. Just let it happen. Alistair has his own pace and believe me, that's a good thing."

"I thought that's what I was doing. Let things happen." Rori sounds seriously compunctious. "I mean, when a man shows... uhm... when he has... when his body... reacts in a certain way... then you would think that's what he wants, right?"

And when he smooches with her and cannot keep his hands under control.

"Rori, Alistairs and you cannot even talk about anything sexual without stuttering and blushing. Neither of you is ready for this. Bless Alistair for being such a gentleman!"

I don't feel as gentlemanly as Leliana claims I am. So I pull my blanket over my head and hope that this awful feeling of shame that makes me wish for a hole in the ground to open and swallow me will go away soon. Last thing I hear is Rori groan in exasperation so I take it she is probably feeling quite the same. Poor girl.
... Rori is in my tent. I don't know how she got there but when I turn on my mat, she is curled to my side. She is asleep with her rosebud lips slightly parted. She is covered with my blanket but I can feel the heat radiating off her naked body. I reach out to trace my fingertips across her forehead to her lips. Her eyes flutter open and she looks at me in awe. "Alistair," she gasps softly. The sound of her voice saying my name makes me shiver with anticipation. She moves closer, pressing her body against mine. I feel myself grow hard when her lips capture mine for a deep, longlasting kiss.

My hands move on their own accord, sliding down the side of her body to cup her buttocks and squeeze them gently. Her kissing grows more urgent, her arms wrap around my neck, fingers entangle with my hair. I rest one hand at the small of her back, my free hand cups one of her breasts, squeezing it gently. My thumb brushes across the hardening pearls of her nipples. I pull her closer, making her feel my erection. She moans softly into my mouth and grinds her hips against my hardness as she slips one leg over mine. Her wet core is slick against my length. A moan escapes my lips when she begins to rub herself against me...

I wake with a gasp. My heart is beating fast, my body is tingling with excitement. Staring at the ceiling in the dark it takes me a few moments to realize I am alone in my tent. There's a sticky wetness soaking my shorts and shirt. Blast! The first dream ever that wasn't a nightmare since I became a Grey Warden and it's a wet one about Rori. Not that I am going to complain. It's just a bit - unexpected.

I close my eyes, trying to steady my ragged breathing. How can I still feel her touch linger when this was only a dream? How can her image still haunt me when I close my eyes? My whole body yearns for her while I still try to make up my mind about her. She is such a beautiful creature. She makes me laugh. She says she cares about me. At least she listens to me when I answer one of her many questions. And she remembers.

To be with her, to kiss her, it is more than I have ever dreamt off. Still, I fear this is not the right thing to do, that I am a hindrance for her. She has to concentrate on ending the Blight, so have I but we both seem to get more and more attached to each other. And I become more and more afraid I could lose her.

My desire for her grows stronger every day. But I don't just want to sleep with her as if she was a randomn whore. She deserves more. She deserves this to be beautiful and perfect and right. I have been raised in the Chantry. That... has never been a topic to worry about there for me. But I know that an honourable woman should be married before she... before any lamppost-licking activities. Can Grey Wardens marry? Could I marry Rori? I should be in love with the woman I marry. Am I in love with Rori? How should I know. This is new to me. And to her, too. I wish she was more experienced. Then she could lead me, show me what to do. But she is as lost as I am. I am afraid to hurt her. Afraid to disappoint her. Afraid I could mess this all up. All this really gives me a headache.

After last night, when she asked me if I would join her in her tent, things have become more difficult. I wonder if this had happened so fast if Wynne hadn't caused Rori to become so upset and then did the same with me. I was afraid I could be forced to leave her and I'm quite sure she felt the same about me. And then this lead to...

Can't there be duty and Rori? Does it always have to be duty alone? I cannot imagine a single possible situation that could force me to choose between her and my duty. It's rather unlikely the archdemon takes her hostage, right? Maybe someone else could. Loghain? Sounds more likely. The mere thought makes me sick to my stomach. I don't want to have to deal with this now.
I am so confused.

It is still dark outside but I cannot go back to sleep. So I make use of the time to clean myself and my clothes. I search for clean clothes in my backpack. My shirt has vanished although I am quite sure I put it back into my bag after washing it yesterday. Now it is gone. Maybe I left it at the shore of the river after all.

I crawl out of my tent. The night air is chilly. Sten is keeping watch at the campfire with Barkley. The dog and the Qunari get along well and Sten feeds him sweets when Rori isn't looking. I caught them sharing a muffin yesterday. Sten doesn't look up when I silently make my way past him. No doubt he knows I am here. Blast, I hope I didn't make any noise back there in the tent when I was dreaming. Guess I can always blame it on the nightmares, though.

I stumble past the campfire towards the lake. The grass is wet with dew and although it's chilly I like the feeling against my bare feet. The water of the lake is so smooth that it looks like the surface of a dark mirror, reflecting the moon. I shed my sticky shirt and shorts and stand there in all my naked glory. The water looks as cold as it probably is, still I don't hesitate and plunge myself into it. Part of the templar training is to gain and keep ultimate control over your own body even when you suffer great pain, heat or cold. This is nothing for wimps and part of the training I liked. It calls for a disciplined mind and mine is disciplined enough to allow me to swim until my teeth clatter so loudly that I'm afraid I could wake the whole camp.

I wash my clothes and put the clean ones on. As my clean shirt has gone missing in action, I have to return to the camp shirtless. While I wait for my clothes to dry, I make breakfast. Barkley leaves Sten's side when I drop the bacon into the pan. "Rori said you're on a diet," I remind him. He gives me his puppy dog eyes and whines. "You're a warhound! You shouldn't beg like that." Barkley tilts his head to one side, his eyes grow even larger and he whines in the most heartbreaking manner. "You are shameless." I give him a piece of bacon and he wolfs it down. "Don't you have any self-esteem?" Barkley woofs and darts off into Rori's tent. 

"EEKS! EWWWW! BARKLEY!"

Seems Rori is awake. I chuckle to myself and reach for the rest of the bacon - only to find it gone. "BARKLEY!"

Dawn is breaking when the scent of fresh coffee wafts through the camp. Rori is the first one to come stumbling out of her tent. She still looks half asleep and incredibly cute with her out-of-bed hair and the far too big shirt she is wearing. It still only reaches down to her knees and I can't help staring at her beautiful legs and delicate ankles bluntly.

"Coffee," she grunts when she comes to a halt right in front of me.

"Good morning, dear lady. Have you slept well?" I know she had trouble falling asleep. I'm quite sure I haven't dreamt about her talking to Leliana last night.

"Coffee. Now."

"Your desire is my command." I thrust a mug of coffee into her hands and watch her sip it. If I didn't know that's what she is like right after waking up I'd worry if she was angry with me for having turned her down. She just isn't a morning person. Especially not when she hasn't slept well. Actually Rori is quite a pest when she hasn't slept well. This is nothing personal so I don't need to get worried about it.

The way she looks I'm afraid she could fall asleep standing there. Her eyes are still half closed and
she sways lightly, humming softly to herself. She hasn't buttoned up the shirt to the top and it has slipped off one of her shoulders. I admire the graceful line of the crook of her neck and the porcelain skin that looks as soft as satin. My eyes drop farther down to her cleavage and the swell of her breasts. And I remember the softness of her bosom, how her nipples hardened under my touch. I gulp but the lump in my throat doesn't vanish. Instead images of my dream return to my mind. I need a distraction, something that can take my mind off that image of her body naked and her making love to me. Then the letters stitched into the collar of the shirt catch my eye.

"Hey! You stole my shirt!"

"Huh? Hm, yeah." Rori yawns and stretches like a cat, causing the hem of the shirt to rise a few inches and reveal more of her thighs.

"Why did you do that? I've been looking for it this morning and couldn't find it." I desperately cling to the matter of retrieving my shirt from her. I concentrate on this task as if it was an important mission.

"I needed a nightdress." She empties her mug, pushes it back into my hands and, staggering, turns back towards her tent. If she notices the sharpness of my tone then she doesn't show it. More likely she's still more sleeping than she is awake and doesn't see anything odd in my behaviour. I think myself rather weird. Let her have that shirt. It suits her far better than me anyway. "It's far too early," she mumbles, stiffling another yawn. She's too sleepy to even notice my hungry stare. Maker's Breath!

"That's why you steal my shirt? Why mine? Why not Sten's?"

"Yours smells of you." She hugs the shirt tighter to herself, sounding confused now why I would get so upset about a shirt.

"Oh... ah..." A warmth that makes me forget I am supposed to concentrate on the fact that I am freezing shirtless in the morning chill spreads from my heart through my entire body. It's different from the heat she rises inside me when I watch the voluptuous curves of her body.

I am still staring when Rori with her back turned to me sheds out of the shirt in one graceful move. Beneath it she wears nothing but a pair of black lace panties. I gasp and gawk. "Here, you can have it now." One arm covering her breasts, she tosses the shirt at me before she quickly disappears inside of her tent.

I am too stunned to even try and catch the shirt.

Five minutes after she is gone I manage to make myself move again. The shirt is lying in the grass right in front of my feet. I pick it up and press it to my face. It smells of Rori.
Warden's Peak

Denerim is near now. I have tried to be my usual self but it proves hard not to stammer and blush anytime Rori addresses me. I can't get rid of last night's encounters - both real and dreamt of. She seems to have some trouble herself and the situation is quite awkward. Whenever we try to talk to each other the conversation dies quickly. I don't dare to hold her hand or kiss her, unsure how she would react.

So we walk in uncomfortable silence. For a long time I haven't felt so hopelessly awful. The cold rain pouring down on us doesn't make things any better. There are hardly any travellers on the side roads we use to avoid running into any of Loghain's men. It was Zevran's idea and although I still don't trust him, this one is a good idea. Right now, however, it makes the tension between Rori and me even worse. There's nothing there to distract us, nothing I could use to start a conversation. I've tried with commenting on the weather but really - how lame is that? I am about to lunge into a long babbled apology but Rori beats me to it.

"Bloody blast it!" she mutters, turns on her heel to face me, blocking my path. I come to a halt abruptly, probably looking as stupid as I feel. There is defiance in her eyes and her jaw is set in determination.

"Wh-what?" I don't get to say anymore before Rori pounces. She grabs me, pulls me towards her and kisses me. Her charm is disarming and she shatters whatever has come to stand between us with that one longlasting, lustful kiss.

Wow! And again in capital letters: WOW!

To have an erection while wearing a full plate armor is rather uncomfortable. I try not to but I still walk funny for some time until my desire has cooled down. If it wasn't totally beyond question, I'd shove that girl into the bushes and continue where we stopped last night. Just gentlemen don't do that kind of thing. And I'd probably be hit by lightning before I even got started.

Nonetheless it sounds rather tempting.

Rori slips her hand into mine and has the decency not to comment on my hobbling and wiggling. Her grin though she doesn't bite back.

"Don't say it!" I growl.

"You're so cute!" Rori giggles.

"And you are a cruel woman. I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"I'm that easy to see through, right?"

Merciful Andraste, I am so glad we're back to teasing each other. She doesn't feel put off. She still wants to be with me. I am so utterly relieved. And I guess so is she.

How Levi Dryden managed to find us I will never understand. Mere luck I guess. Levi tells us the story about his family and how Sophia Dryden, the commander of the Grey Wardens some 200 years ago, got them ripped of all their lands and titles. He wants to know the truth and it seems Duncan thought it worth his effort.
So does Rori. Even more so. She gets really excited about Soldier's Peak. "There really is a headquarter of the Grey Wardens in Ferelden next to the one in Denerim?"

"Why should we waste our time with that?" Morrigan complains.

"It belonged to the Grey Wardens. There could still be something there, scrolls, books, something that could help us," Rori points out. "Duncan never had the time to tell me anything about the Grey Wardens. All insider information I know from Alistair."

"Then we really should go. He probably doesn't remember half of the things they told him and the other half he remembers incorrectly," Morrigan snorts.

"Duncan didn't tell me much either. But I perfectly remember the bits he did tell me." I grumble.

"Probably only light information. He must have known of your limited brain resources."

I hate it when she does that. Actually I hate everything about Morrigan, but especially when she makes me look stupid. I am not stupid! Not all the time.

"Can't we just shove her off a cliff somewhere?" I mutter to myself.

"Your luck and she sprouts wings and comes soaring back at us as a dragon like her mother did," Rori remarks cheerfully. At least one of us thinks this is funny. I glare at her gloomily and earn myself a charming smile and a kiss to the tip of my nose.

We don't have to make a big detour on our way to Denerim, so Rori decides we can stop at Soldier's Peak quickly, help Levi, find out more about the Grey Wardens and be back to deal with the Blight in no time at all.

"With a bit of luck, we can turn this place into our new headquarters for now - depending on how much still is intact after 200 years of neglect," Rori muses.

We climb that mountain, following Levi. He at least claims he knows which way to go. The rain has stopped instead now it snows. If the weather continues to torture us like that we will die of pneumonia before we even reach the top of that blasted mountain.

Finally the fortress rises from the mist like a jagged appendix sitting on top of the mountain. 200 years of neglect indeed have asked its toll and the former grandeur has vanished altogether.

"Soldier's Peak," I mutter, taking in the sight of the formerly magnificent fortress.

"Some people call this place the Lost Peak. Before King Maric's decree, the last Grey Wardens of Ferelden lived here. Oh, I just got chills." Leliana shudders.

"Looks like it's seen better days. Better centuries more like." It makes me somewhat sad and reminds me of how lonely Rori and I are. True, we have our companions to help us. But as Grey Wardens we stand alone. None of the others will ever understand what it means to be a Grey Warden.

"Once the Wardens flourished, their ranks full, their calibre certain. Now they even accept people like you, Alistair." Morrigan snorts.

"Hey!" At least I survived the Joining. That has to mean something, right?

"And like me," Rori points out, effectively silencing Morrigan.

The fortress is crammed with demons and undead. Of course. Why should anything ever be easy?
Rori once sighs, then sets to work and at the end of the day the fortress is demon-free and the veil has been tightened again so that no demons can come uninvited.

"Looks like we're done. A demonic invasion thwarted, a Warden base safely rescued. We do good work." I announce cheerfully.

"And we have headquarters again." Rori managed to persuade Levi to use the keep as a warehouse. Some parts of the fortress desperately need thorough repair, others are still intact for housing a family, two wardens and their companions and for being used for storage.

For a moment when Rori promised Sophia to allow her to leave I was worried that's what she really would do. I can't tell if she was lying or first really had the intention to make a deal. Now only an insanely old blood mage Grey Warden is left in the keep. And us. It's too dark and foggy to climb down the mountain. So while our companions clean some of the rooms to spend the night there, Rori and I skip through Avernus' notes.

What he did leaves me speechless. I am shocked to find every detail of his work scribbled neatly into his journals. Unlike me he has a very tidy handwriting. "This is... insane." And disgusting. Shifting uneasily, I glimpse at the door that leads to the mage's laboratory. Rori left him alive and even allowed him to go on with his researches - without any victims. "Do you really think it was a good idea to leave him unpunished?"

Rori looks up from the journal she has been reading. Shutting the journal, she turns it thoughtfully in her hands, biting her lips while she thinks about my question. "Yes and no. When I read this I feel I should have made him pay. But we cannot undo what he did. This has already happened and no punishment will undo the suffering. And then there's his results. They can become very useful."

She already got excited about the possibilities of Avernus' magic when she first picked up one of his notes. Add her decision to allow him to live and I wasn't expecting anything else from her. That doesn't mean I understand or agree. "You think we should make use of something that was achieved by blood magic?"

"One day we will have to recruit new Grey Wardens. Avernus' research - as horrible as it is - could make the Joining less deadly," Rori points out. Her eyes are glinting with excitement at the thought. "Imagine how many we could save and how we could increase the numbers of the Grey Wardens. Plus, our Joining, how they used the blood of the darkspawn to turn us into Grey Wardens, that was bloodmagic, too, wasn't it?"

"Good point." I admit. I have never thought much about the Joining and the use of blood. Stupid, isn't it? I used to be a templar but I didn't mind gulping down magically altered darkspawn blood.

"And it could help us to become stronger while at the same time the taint would decrease. It also could help us to survive longer with the taint. Maybe we could overcome the Calling."

What she says makes sense, although I still can't get over how Avernus achieved the knowledge Rori now wants to be used for our and the Grey Warden's benefit. Duncan once told me the Grey Wardens do whatever is necessary to stop a Blight - or the darkspawn in general. Maybe he would have approved to Rori's decision. At least she strictly forbade Avernus to use any more blood magic. I don't know how she wants to control him, but I have seen her talking to Levi and I guess they have come to an agreement that also includes watching Avernus. Doesn't soothe my worries, though. I don't want to return here to the Drydens having been turned into Avernus' new probands.

"First we have to survive this Blight. Then we can think about recruiting new Grey Wardens. I have no clue how to do it." And although I see the necessity I have no desire doing so. To choose men
and women to join our ranks also means condemning them to die, either during the Joining or when the Calling drives us into the Deep Roads. A fate Rori won't simply accept.

I don't know how Duncan could endure making the choices he made. The faces of all the dead had to haunt him. I wouldn't want the responsibility he had. And again I am about to load this burden onto the narrow shoulders of the girl in front of me. I just know she will do whatever is necessary. I admire her strength.

She has grown up rather sheltered and still she has not once tried to back out of her responsibility ever since she was forced out of her home. She mentioned she wanted to become a Grey Warden - but did she realize what it would be like?

"The Joining is another reason to allow Avernus to live," Rori remarks. "He can feed us the information we need once we do need it. For now I doubt we could afford wasting time with recruiting people. Duncan didn't just pick anybody, did he? And although our companions are all fabulous..."

"Save for Morrigan."

"... I wouldn't want to recruit them."

"Duncan made careful choices. He said he would only take those he thought would stand a chance to survive the Joining. He was a good judge of character. He chose you after all."

"And you."

"According to Morrigan that was an act of despair." I laugh. The way Rori snorts is balm for my bruised male ego. "But good to know there's an insane blood mage to help us if we are lucky enough to stay alive."

"I like to make myself believe I actually have a future," Rori says rather stubbornly. "Doesn't mean I don't realize every day could be my last... still... is it so wrong to dream of a future that's not only darkspawn and death?"

"For a Grey Warden that's what it is, Rori."

"The Calling, yes. But in between the Joining and the Calling, we can have a life and I intend to live it." The way she looks at me, makes my nerves tingle. I feel a by now familiar warmth spread through my body. My affection for her is becoming my greatest weakness so quickly I am afraid I couldn't end it even if I tried. It makes me worry about what lies ahead of us.

Rori doesn't give me any chance to get lost in my thoughts, though. Like she said, she intends to live her life and she doesn't waste any time. She crosses the distance between us, crawling on hands and knees, reminding me once more of a cat. The intensity of her gaze is hypnotizing. My heartbeat speeds up before she even touches me. I sit on the floor with my back against one of Avernus' bookshelves, my legs stretched out in front of me. Rori takes the journal I've been reading from me and tosses it aside.

Then she crawls atop of me, never taking her eyes off me. Her legs planted to both sides of mine, her hands grabbing the board of the shelf behind me. She doesn't touch me but is close enough for me to feel the heat of her body. I dare not to move when she leans in and rubs her cheek playfully against mine like a cat. Her lips brush across my chin, follow my jawline and the outline of my ear. Her hot breath whispers in my ear, making me shiver with anticipation.

"Alistair..." Rori aspirating my name, her lips moving gently against my skin is enough to make me
moan. She gently bites my earlobe then moves on to trail soft bites down the side of my neck. My hands, still resting on my thighs, curl into fists. When she entangles her fingers with my hair to pull my head back and claim my lips, thinking becomes impossible. Even more so as she now is sitting in my lap, pressed tightly against me.

I guess I should stop her now. Instead I run my hands up the side of her body, starting at her thighs, moving across her hips and waist, whispering past her ribs. She wears a tight fitting blue and white striped blouse tied with red laces on the front. My fingers find the first lace, pulling it open to reveal a small patch of bare skin. Feverishly I move on towards the second lace, then the third.

We only break our kiss when we have to gasp for air. Rori has slipped my shirt over my head - I don't know when that happened. Probably sometime before or after I opened her blouse. At the moment I am staring at her bosom and I am quite sure my expression is ressembling that of a complete retard. She has the most beautiful breasts I can imagine - not that I have seen many in my life. Rori's breasts are perfect. Round and white with rosy nipples that harden to little pearls when I rub them between my thumb and index finger. She's so beautiful I just have to kiss her there.

Rori moans and bucks her hips, rubbing herself against my erection. "Rori," I gasp her name, my hips moving to meet her. I wrap my arms around her waist, pressing her body against mine, skin meeting skin. She bites down on my lower lip before she kisses me with unrestrained passion.

"When you said you were going to study up here, what exactly did you mean?" The voice coming from the door makes us jump apart. It's as if someone has dumped a bucket of icy water over my head. Rori instinctively pulls her blouse tightly around her to cover her breasts. We both stare in horror at Morrigan standing in the door.

"You two are so gross." She pulls a face like she is going to vomit. "Dinner is ready. Get dressed and wash your filthy hands."
During dinner I do not dare to look up from my plate. Well, once I cast a quick glance at Rori across the table. She's all flushed, keeping her eyes cast down while she nervously attacks the coney on her plate with her knife. Noticing me stare, her eyes meet mine briefly. She looks almost scared.

Around us a far too cheerful conversation takes place. It's almost painful to listen. Silence, however, would be even worse. I am surprised Morrigan hasn't yet told every juicy detail. So at least Rori and I are spared even more embarrassment.

Blast it! I have never had as much trouble to stay true to my upbringing. I cannot even blame Rori. Things just get out of hand whenever we are left alone with each other. I have no doubt she didn't intend seducing me first place. The way she kissed and touched me back in Avernus' study was far more testing and exploring than a planned assault. I can sense her hesitance as much as her excitement when she is with me. And the surprise and shock when her actions show certain results. It's the same with me. It's so overwhelming it's a bit like looking down at oneself from outside one's body. I cannot explain it any better. It's all: Whoa, what am I doing here? And while I still wonder about that, I have already moved on to doing something else that's even more scandalous.

I mean, it's got nothing to do with thinking first, there's no plan behind it. I don't sit there and go, hey, I could fondle her breasts. It just happens. Like now when I am having dinner with my companions and all I can think about is the slightly salty taste of Rori's skin and the softness of her flesh against my lips.

"Alistair?"

"Huh?" I haven't noticed Wynne was talking to me.

"I've asked if you found something interesting in Avernus' study?"

"He indeed did," Morrigan comments. Rori's head bounces up just like mine and we both stare at the witch with horror. Morrigan chuckles. Oh that mean witch!

"Uhm, Grey Warden stuff. I'm not sure what I can tell you," I mutter, hoping Wynne will not ask for more information. The Grey Wardens keep many secrets and I don't know how many I should tell. Rori and I have found a lot of books and scrolls written in cipher. Maybe Avernus could tell us what they say but it is quite clear the Grey Wardens didn't want just anybody to know

Wynne looks at me, waiting for more explanation but gives up when I only stare past her blankly. I wish this dinner would end.

When it finally does, Rori and I are the first to jump off our chairs like little children do that cannot endure to keep still any longer. We excuse ourselves and hurry out of the room, almost bouncing into each other at the door. Rori dodges past me towards her room, but stops in front of her door, uncertainly. Across the corridor, right opposite her room, there's mine and we both stand there in front of our doors, unsure of what to do. I can hear her breathing although I cannot see her, having my back turned towards her.

I just have to push the door open and close it behind me. Then I would be save. Instead I turn, finding myself to face her as she turns at the same time. "Rori," I begin, then, searching for words nowhere to be found, I pause.

"I'm sorry," I finally blurt out at the same time as she does. She blinks, then laughs and I laugh with
her. Tension broken. It's as easy as that. She bites her lips, blushing as she kneads her hands. There's still an awkwardness between us but it seems to be part of what we are so it's not that bad, is it?

"Things got a little out of control today, didn't they?" Rori asks timidly in a low voice.

"Seems they get out of control whenever we... are close," I sigh, leaning against the wall. The distance of the corridor is still between us.

"Is that a bad thing?" Rori asks, making one step towards me.

"Do you think it's bad?" I close the room between us by another step.

"No. Not at all." Another step closer.

"Good." I smile, make my step and embrace her. She slips her arms around my neck when I kiss her, a soft kiss and I intend to keep it like that - although I am tempted to throw her at the wall and kiss her with passion. We say goodnight like a good boy and girl. I dare say it takes her as much self-control as it takes me. At least I can go to bed without having to worry about how she feels about our encounter.

This is a dream. It's a realization that dawns on me the very moment I am thrown into the illusion of Rori and I together in front of a crackling campfire. We are surrounded by a pitch black darkness. Something lures in it, I can feel it there although I cannot see it. Rori seems unaware of the danger. She doesn't listen to my warnings but drowns them with her kisses. I try to resist but fail and in the end I give in, allowing her to push me down to the soft ground as she mounts me. I have no idea where her clothes went or when it happened that I am making love to her. I move with her rhythm as she rides me, arching her back and tilting back her head to expose her throat to me. I reach out to touch her...

Suddenly she is pulled of me. Clawed hands, the darkened flesh on them covered in blisters tear her away. Her cry is muffled by a hand clapping down on her mouth.

I am watching now, pushed aside to become an observer. The darkness is lit by a reddish glow. Darkspawn has risen from their hiding places and they grope at Rori's naked body. I cry out in fury and pain, struggling to get to her but I can't. It's as if I was frozen to the ground. I call her name and she turns to look at me. Only then do I realize it's not Rori. It's a dwarven woman and she is crying. The darkspawn claw at her but they do not tear her apart. Her mouth opens for a scream but the sound is drowned by a darkspawn covering her mouth with its.

I wake with a startled cry. My heart is hammering in my chest, I am covered in cold sweat and tremble so badly I can hardly sit up. I feel bile rising and have to fight it down not to become violently sick. Wet dreams about Rori mingled with my darkspawn nightmares! That's nothing I ever want to experience again.

This all felt so real - because that's what it was. At least the part about the darkspawn. I don't know who the poor dwarven female was. I cannot even imagine what happens to her. And there's nothing I can do for her. Dwarves do not believe in the Maker. Still I pray for her, beg the Maker to have mercy - because the darkspawn certainly won't.

I'm on my knees, reciting Chantry intercessions. My breathing is still ragged, my heartbeat only slowly returns to its normal pace. There's silence but my mumbling and the sound of my blood ruhsing in my veins.

Suddenly a scream pierces the silence. I bolt, grabbing my sword as I burst through the door and
across the corridor. Another scream, agonized and panicked. I kick Rori's door down and storm into her room at the sound of her third scream. She's sitting upright in the middle of her makeshift bed, blankets tossed aside, and screams in frantic terror. Her eyes are huge and fearful, tears stream down her cheeks and she's shaking violently. I drop the sword where I stand and hurry to kneel beside her.

Trying to touch her makes her jump and back away until she's cornered with her back against the wall. She never stops screaming. I've never heard such agonized cries before. She kicks at me when I try again to get hold of her, talking to her soothingly.

There's noises behind me when the rest of the group charges through the door. It has to be quite a picture for them. Rori backed up against the wall, screaming as if she was getting skinned alive. I on my knees in front of her wearing nothing but my underwear.

"What have you done to her, you filthy deviant?" Morrigan snarls behind me. I really have no blasted nerve to deal with her now.

"Nightmares," I simply snap before returning my attention to Rori.

"What kind of nightmare can cause such a reaction?" Morrigan demands to know.

I know. But I won't explain it to her. She wouldn't understand. Rori hasn't woken in time. She has seen and felt what happened to the dwarven girl while I was lucky to wake before the darkspawn could show me whatever it was they did to that poor soul. I cannot imagine. I do NOT want to imagine.

In the end I have no other choice but to slap Rori. She abruptly stops screaming and stares at me, blinking bewildered. Her vision is all blurry with tears. She's still trembling, she's still frightened but at least she's silent. She pulls her knees up, hugging them against her chest and sobs. It's a heartbreaking sound but at least this time she allows me to pull her into my arms. She clings to me as if her life depended on that contact between her and me.

I hug her, I hold and cradle her and whisper idiotic things we both know aren't true like everything's going to be alright to her. I don't care about the others. This is only Rori and me. Only Grey Wardens can understand what it feels like, these nightmares that are so real one can smell them, taste them, and feel utterly soiled inside and out for days afterwards. Behind me I hear Wynne shoo everybody else out of the room. She drowns every protest immediately and shuts the door firmly behind her.

There's an argument taking place in the corridor outside Rori's room. I do not care to listen. Rori begins to relax in my arms. Maybe she's just exhausted. Maybe she has reached that point where the horror fades into a dull ache that is yet another scar on her soul.

She cries with her face pressed against my shoulder. Her tears tickle down my bare chest. I gently rub her back, noticing she again has stolen one of my shirts. Finally her sobbing ceases. She isn't trembling anymore, just lies very still in my arms.

"There..." Her voice is raw, fearful and husky. She doesn't sound at all like herself. "There was a dwarven girl..."

"Hush." I whisper into her hair. She doesn't have to tell me. I understand without her giving me an explanation she shouldn't feel obliged to give. She noticeably relaxes against me. It's a comfort to not have to excuse yourself for getting freaked by your dreams. It's good not to be looked upon as if you lost your mind.

The others, they know Grey Wardens have nightmares - more than any normal person. It is
impossible to travel with Grey Wardens and not notice the nightmares. They claim to understand but
truth is, they don't. They have their own nightmares - who wouldn't after all we've been through?
But those nightmares, they are not like ours. You only understand after the Joining. The others
always have that strange look when they regard you after another nightmare has woken the whole
camp. There's pity in their eyes. And the last thing you want is to be pitted. They also believe you to
be a bit odd. Maybe they admire your strength or comment on what you have to endure. And all you
wish for is they would shut up and leave you alone.

I'm too nice to do that. I just force a crooked smile onto my face and nod. Rori isn't as nice. She has
an explosive temper. She only a week ago snapped at Leliana to shut up and get lost when the bard
commented on one of her nightmares. "The Maker smiles sadly on His Grey Wardens as no sacrifice
is greater than theirs," Leliana recited and Rori almost punched her in the face.

"Fuck the Maker and His blasted smiles!" she cried. "Shut the fuck up, Leliana. You know nothing
about this!"

The bard looked thoroughly hurt but did as she was told. Nobody afterwards dared to say a word.
Even Morrigan didn't make a smart comment. Later Rori apologized and gave a lame explanation -
one of those we have for the outsiders. For those who never have felt the darkspawn entering their
minds.

"Alistair?" Rori mumbles, her lips brushing against my skin.

"At your service." That makes her smile. It's a very small smile, though.

"Can you stay here tonight?" She glimpses at me shyly. Her eyes are reddish and puffed. Tears make
them glitter in the dim glow of the burnt down fire in the fireplace.

"I won't leave," I promise. "I will stay and watch over you." I try to make her lay down again but she
won't let go of me.

"Can you hold me?" It is a timidly and hesitantly asked question. I was intending to sit next to her
and watch her sleep not to lie beside her and embrace her. It seems inadequate. This is certainly
nothing a not married couple should be doing and I don't want to add to all the other things we
already did that a not married couple shouldn't be doing. One look at her face and all these thoughts
get tossed out of the window.

Oh... blast it! She needs this. She needs me. Tomorrow she'll shrug it off, hold her head up high and
move on. She'll cope with it. But tonight she can't do it alone. Only a heartless fool would give her a
lecture about appropriate behaviour now.

Nodding my consent, I lie down beside her. She snuggles against me, resting her head at my
shoulder, as I cover us both with her blanket and wrap my arms around her.

Maybe I should be more excited - but there's really nothing sexual about holding her. It's just Rori
and I being together and it feels so right. To hold her in my arms, to feel hers sneak around my waist,
her head resting at my shoulder. It's one of the most peaceful moments in my life. It's as if I finally
have come home.

She's so exhausted, she drifts back to sleep almost immediately. "Alistair," she murmurs softly,
snuggling closer. I smile and kiss the top of her head.
The next morning when I wake I feel rested - more than I have for a long time. I lie with my eyes still closed, enjoying the comfortable warmth of the blanket around and the softness of Rori's body snuggled against me. I sneak my arm around her waist and nuzzle her neck gently when she stirs in her sleep.

"Mmmh," she mumbles and a smile tugs at the corners of her mouth. She turns to face me, sleepily opening her eyes. Her smile brightens when she looks at me. "Alistair," she sighs. It's almost a purr. She stretches like a cat that has just woken and then snuggles closer to me. Suddenly she stiffens, her eyes grow wide and she looks at me with a mixture of surprise and embarrassment.

Ah-ha-ha... she has found my morning glory...

I blush deeply and lunge into a hastily stammered apology... that Rori drowns with a kiss. It's one of those typical Rori-kisses. She has a boisterous passion, wild and still tender. I am in bed with an almost naked beautiful woman and I am not prepared for this. I feel panic rising inside me next to a growing excitement. I have to stop this - now. But it is Rori who breaks the kiss and hurriedly leaves me lying there alone. I am confused to say the least.

"Where do you go?" I ask, wondering what I have done wrong now.

She stops at the door and looks back at me, blushing. "I have to pee," she says, grinning sheepishly as she shifts her weight uncomfortably.

"Ohh... ah... haha..." Awkward. She slips out of the door and I am left wondering whether I should stay in bed and wait for her return or get up and avoid any more situations that are bound to lead to more awkwardness. I am still there trying to make up my mind when she returns.

She is so beautiful, all sleepy with her tousled out-of-bed-hair. It looks even cuter now she allows it to grow longer. At least that's what I think. She keeps complaining she looks stupid and keeps taming her mane with a hairband.

She slips back into bed next to me and then something awfully cold touches my legs. I flinch and gasp. "Andraste's flaming sword! What is that?"

"Uhm... my feet?"

I stop my attempt to get away from the cold things, and sighing accept my fate. I cannot let her catch a cold, can I? "Did you take a walk in the snow?"

"All the way around the fortress. Just so I can make you warm my feet," she laughs, teasing me by rubbing her icy feet at my legs.

"Such a cruel thing to do," I grin and wrap one of her bright red curls around my finger.

Rori is much the same as always. As I said, she'd cope with it. The nightmares haunt her but she will not let them dominate her life. It's the only way to deal with them. It's not easy, though. Despite the nightmares and all the other wonderful things that come with being a Grey Warden - like being tainted by the darkspawn blood inside us - I have never once regretted leaving the templars and joining the Grey Wardens. I was so desperately unhappy in the Chantry. Oh, wait, once briefly I did regret it - that was when I believed to be the only one left with Duncan and Rori dead. But the moment she walked out of Flemeth's hut that thought vanished. I wonder if Rori ever regretted her
Joining. Not that we have much of a choice once we reach the point of no return.

"You never told me why you wanted to become a Grey Warden," I mumble. Rori's head rests at my shoulder, my arm is wrapped around her waist and she lazily draws patterns on my chest with her finger.

"My teacher Aldous told me many stories about the Grey Wardens. And then I guess I read too many adventure books. Fergus had a whole series about the Grey Wardens. I read them a dozen times or more."

"Yes, I read those, too. They were forbidden in the Chantry - like anything not religious - but I read them anyway until they found out because I read a book during our lessons and got caught. They made me burn them all."

"What a cruel thing to do!" Rori exclaims. "Gilmore and I used to pretend we were Grey Wardens," she goes on excitedly. "We got in trouble with Nan a lot because we chased the chickens around with our wooden swords, pretending they were darkspawn. And the cows were ogres. Gilmore almost got run over by the bull once." I can sense her smile against my bare skin and how it fades. "There was nothing about the nightmares in the books, though. Or about the Joining and the taint."

"No, nothing about that. But they also don't tell you templars have to take lyrium when they start training you." Maybe because I have already experienced the boundaries of the Chantry I can handle the ones of the Grey Wardens better. I don't know how it has to feel for someone who actually had a life before. My life in the Chantry didn't feel much like a life at all to me. If was like being buried alive. Still, the price I have to pay for being a Grey Warden, I do know it's a high price.

Rori begins to realize what being a Grey Warden really means. But she is noone to sit down and accept a fate when she sees a chance to fight it. She's far too stubborn for this. She has allowed Avernus to go on with his studies for a reason. Avernus is offering a chance and I know she is going to use it. I'm not sure if this is the right thing to do. I always believed that the Grey Wardens were my way to happiness. Ever since I became trapped in the Fade and in an illusion of a happy family, I have felt a bit lost. I am proud to be a Grey Warden. I am thankful that Duncan recruited me and saved me from the templars.... But deep down inside I have doubts. And I feel ashamed of them. It's like betraying Duncan. It's like failing my destiny. I know Rori drags me along. Her point of view, her opinion. It's important to me. She changes a lot. I don't know if this is a good thing. It feels good. It feels right. And still I feel guilty. Oh, I'm so lost.

"Do you regret having become a Grey Warden?" I blurt out.

Rori, still safely in my arms, keeps drawing patterns on my chest with her finger. She doesn't answer right away. If not for her restless moving fingers I'd wonder if she has fallen asleep. Finally she props up on her elbows to look me in the eyes. Her gaze is intense and full of affection. "No," she whispers - and then she kisses me. It's one of these kisses that make my nerves tingle and makes a warmth spread through my entire body. If I died now I'd die a happy man.

"I want Barkley to become a Grey Warden mabari." Rori informs me once our kiss ends. Her breathing is still ragged and I first believe I misunderstood.

"You... what?" Now, that is a surprise. And it for sure turns my thoughts away from the excitement of her body pressed against mine.

"I read about it in one of the books yesterday," she explains giddily. "It will protect him against the taint when he bites darkspawn. And Avernus knows how to do it. I asked him. He said he could mix the potion for Barkley."
She has a point there. But... "You risk losing him."

"Barkley and I talked it through." If he wasn't a mabari I'd now think she was funny. But the warhound is too clever for his own good. Sometimes I even wonder if Morrigan has a point when she claims Barkley to be smarter than me. "He knows of the risk. So do I. But... I do not believe he will die. Not him. He's an extraordinary dog."

"With an extraordinary mistress." And that earns me another kiss. One of these kisses that call for a cold bath to cool down afterwards.

After breakfast Rori, Barkley and I climb all the way up to Avernus' tower together while the others pack our belongings. As a gentleman I walk in front of her of course and prevent any temptation of staring at her hindquarters that way. Although I have to admit I imagine how her hips sway and how the leather of her pants hugs her firm little buttocks.

Avernus has already prepared the ritual. The old mage makes my skin crawl. Rori said to think of him like of Morrigan: useful. Well, he could be and if having to choose between Avernus and Morrigan I don't think the witch would win. "Do we speak the words for the warhound, too?" I wonder.

"Well, he's becoming one of us, so we should, shouldn't we?" Rori ponders. Barkley woofs his approval, wagging his tail excitedly.

"Just don't tell Morrigan," I grumble. "She'll rub this in endlessly. Me being dumber than the dog and so on. You know her."

"My lips are sealed."

I say the words that are spoken for any recruit and in the presence of Avernus, Rori and me Barkley becomes a Grey Warden mabari. He gulps down the whole potion Avernus has ready for him in a bowl... he sniffs, he belches, he shakes his head and whines. And that's it.

"He didn't even faint," I gasp when Barkley looks at us with huge puppy dog eyes, expecting a praise and a cookie.

"Yeah, don't you feel like a complete loser now?" Rori groans as she pets her warhound. "Because I do." She fainted during her Joining. So did I. We look at each other at the same time and in unison decide: "No word to Morrigan about that."
Denerim. I've been looking forward to this - and I am scared out of my mind. Not because of all the guards looking for us or the wanted posters with Rori and my image. She has a higher price on her head than I have. I don't know if I should feel insulted.

"I'd charge more for her, too," Zevran comments.

"She beat you up," I point out. "I wouldn't give it another try if I were you."

"No worries, I won't."

We go in disguised, splitting up. Rori, Zevran, Leliana and Morrigan have no problems sneaking past any guards or making themselves invisible. With me this is different. Wherever Rori and Leliana got that templar uniform from that I wear for disguise, I feel rather uncomfortable. And that's not alone about the armour. At the moment I'd rather be elsewhere. Even Ostagar sounds like a cozy place now that I stand in front of my sister's house. I could just walk by and forget about it. Goldanna was in my Fade dream. Ever since I've been secretly hoping that I could finally find a family. My family. That I'd not be some homeless unwanted bastard anymore. At the same time I'm terribly afraid of this moment. I sweat and my heart beats as fast as when I charge darkspawn. All I have to do now is walk by and forget about this...

Rori notices I have fallen back. "Alistair? Are you alright?"

"Uhm.. that's my sister's house." I point at the small building squeezed in between more narrow buildings close to the market square. It's neither the best quarters nor the worst. "I'm almost sure of it." I fumble around in my backpack until I find a crinkled piece of paper. Rori looks over my shoulder as I frown, trying to decipher my own handwriting. What can I say? I don't have no tidy handwriting and I've been quite in a hurry when I took that note. "Yes, this is the right address." I inhale deeply, staring at the door of the small house. "She could be inside. Could we... go and see?" I look hopefully at Rori. I have no idea if I rather want her to say yes or no.

"Wouldn't you rather meet her on your own? This is a private moment, isn't it?"

Morrigan snorts from behind. "He needs you to hold his hand."

I ignore her best I can and fight down the urge to use my templar skills on her. "Do I seem a little nervous?"

"Only a tiny little bit."

"I am. I really don't know what to expect. I'd like you to be there with me, if you're willing." How can something so simple be so hard? I want to go back to a battlefield and kill darkspawn. At least there I am never lost in confusion. Before Rori can answer, I hurry on. "Or we could... leave. I suppose, we really don't have time to pay a visit, do we? Maybe we should go..." I turn to leave but Rori grabs my hand and pulls me along.

"Fine, let's see if she's home," she says firmly, knocking at the door before I can stop her.

"Will she even know who I am? Does she even know I exist? My sister. That sounds very strange. Sister. Siiiissster. Hmm, now I'm babbling. We should go. Let's go. Let's just...go."

We stand in front of the door and wait. Rori knocks again. Nobody answers. A wave of relief
washes over me - until Rori discovers the door is open and just marches in with me in tow.

Inside the house it's dim. It smells of soap and freshly washed clothes, the clean scent mixing with the smell of cabbage and potatoes. Through a door I can see a fire crackling in a fireplace with a pot dangling on a chain. Somewhere a baby cries.

"Er... hello?" I call, glad that Rori indeed holds my hand.

A blonde woman in her early thirties appears from the kitchen, wiping her hands at her apron. "Eh? You have linens to wash?" she asks.

"I'm... not here to have any washing done," I mutter. I don't know what to do with my hands. I shift my weight uncomfortably and wish to be somewhere else. This woman, is she Goldanna?

"Although we really should consider this," Rori mumbles next to me. "Someone really washing our stuff instead of us freezing off our fingers when scrubbing dried blood and darkspawn ichor out of our shirts in icy rivers."

I shoot her a glare and she shrugs with an apologetical grin. Always the practical type. Still, we're not going to make my sister wash our stuff! Especially not Sten's underwear. Or my socks. We'd have to pay a danger bonus to anybody who does that washing.

As the woman's waiting and growing impatient, I hurry to answer her. "My name's Alistair. I'm... well, this may sound sort of strange, but are you Goldanna? If so, I suppose, I'm your brother."

The woman couldn't have looked more surprised if we had asked her to wash the underwear of the Maker himself. "My what? I am Goldanna, yes, how do you know my name? What kind of tomfoolery are you folk up to?"

"He's telling the truth, listen to him," Rori says while I still try to find the right words to explain what seems unbelievable. If not for that maid from Redcliffe that had come to Ostargar to serve her new mistress I'd never have gotten to know of Goldanna at all. But this maid recalled me and my mother. And she recalled Goldanna.

I explain to Goldanna best I can and in her eyes I can see it dawns on her. But there is no warmth there. Recognition, yes, and anger.

"You! I knew it! They told me you was dead! They told me the babe was dead and died along with mother, but I knew they was lying!"

Hope flares inside of me. She is only confused. The harsh sound of her voice, the way she glares at me. That all is only due to her shock. Who wouldn't be shocked and confused under such circumstances?

"I'm sorry, I didn't know that. The babe didn't die. I'm him. I'm... your brother." I am trying to find some emotion inside myself, something that connects me with that woman that is my sister. I should love her simply because of that fact. It should mean something. But all I can find is confusion - and sadness. This doesn't feel right, not like the dream I had in the Fade.

Goldanna scoffs. "For all the good it does me! You killed Mother, you did, and I've had to scrape by all this time! The coin didn't last long and when I went back they ran me off."

I wince. She couldn't have hurt me more if she slapped me. I stand there dumbfounded. I lost my mother, too. I never knew her. I... somehow I hoped Goldanna could share her memories with me. Eamon never told me much.
"Whoa!" Rori exclaims. "That's hardly Alistair's fault!" she snaps. I want her to calm down. Getting angry won't get us anywhere.

Goldanna, arms akimbo, snarls back at her. "And who in the Maker's name are you? Some tart following after his riches, I expect."

"You shouldn't assume what you want is what anybody else wants," Rori hisses, her fists clenched. I really can't blame her.

"Hey, don't speak to her that way!" I snap at Goldanna. I don't want to argue with my sister but I can't let her call Rori a tart. She didn't do anything at all to Goldanna. She has no right to judge her. "She's my friend." More than that but I think it's unwise to call her... what? My girlfriend? My lover? Someone I really care about? Friend seems best when anything else is complicated. A friend with certain benefits. "And a Grey Warden. Just like me."

"Ohhhh, I see! A prince and a Grey Warden, too! Well, who am I to think poorly of someone so high and mighty compared to me?"

My hand comes to a rest on Rori's shoulder when I hear her snarl. I don't want her to start a fight but she has the temper to do so. This is important to me, so she reins herself in.

"I don't know you, boy. Your royal father forced himself on my mother and took her away from me, and what do I got to show for it? Nothing!They tricked me good! I should have told everyone! I got five mouths to feed, and unless you can help with that, I got less than no use for you..."

"Use..." Rori mutters, I can sense her muscles tighten under my grasp.

"I... I'm sorry... I don't know what to say." I feel as helpless as I must look because Rori takes pity of me and gritting her teeth, she manages not to sound like she is going to punch Goldanna in the face anytime soon when she addresses her.

"Goldanna, Alistair came here to find his family."

"Well, he found it. And what good is that for me? None, that's what, unless he can see to it that his family lives as it should!"

"And how should that be?" Rori croons in a dangerously soft voice. I hurry to jump in before Goldanna can retort.

"I'd love to help you out, but I don't think we really have enough money to spare. I wish we did."

Goldanna snorts. "You, a prince marching in here with your fancy armor and such and this is all you got to offer?"

Rori and I exchange a glance. It wouldn't make a difference if we told her about the campsite and the nights in the chill of the frost. Or the days we have gone to bed hungry. That we are hunted and hunters at the same time. About the darkspawn or about that armour probably being stolen. And the one I usually wear having belonged to a dead knight and that it took Bodhan three hours of work to hammer the dents out of it. Rori shakes her head. No, I don't think it would make a difference.

"You must think I'm very stupid." Goldanna spits out.

"No, wait, I don't think that at all..." I cry out desperatedly. Why does she do that to me? What have I done to her? I.... I killed mother. Yeah, probably I did. Probably I owe her.
"But I do," Rori growls.

"I want to help if I can..." I mumble disheartened.

"You want to help? You go to whatever high and mighty folks you run with, and you tell them you got nephews and nieces that aren't living as they've a right to! You do that!"

Rori's hackles are raised when she turns to me. Oh, she looks furious. "It looks like all she wants is your money. Not that there's anything there. But go explain that to her and we'll still be here arguing when the archdemon knocks down the front door."

"Yeah, it really seems that way, doesn't it? I wasn't expecting my sister to be so... I'm starting to wonder why I came." That dream I had in the Fade, it all crumbles. I stupidly hoped there would be a place to call home. Somewhere to return to after the Blight is over. Something to look forward to. Rori gently puts her hand on my shoulder, offering silent comfort.

"I don't know why you came, either, or what you expected to find. But it is not here. Now get out of my house, the both of you!"

"Let's leave. Now." Rori pulls at my arm.

"I agree. Let's get out of here." We leave without a goodbye and I catch the door and close it slowly when Rori is about to slam it shut. Her anger is part of her being protective over me - which is kind of cute but not very helpful.

"Well... that was not what I expected. To put it lightly," I sigh once we are out of that house. Blast, ain't I glad that Rori sent the others away shopping supplies? "This is the family I've been wondering about all my life? That shrew is my sister? I can't believe it. I guess I was expecting her to accept me without question. Isn't that what family is supposed to do? I... I feel like a complete idiot."

Rori gently takes my hand in hers. "You are not an idiot, Alistair, and I am sorry that this happened to you. You are such a wonderful man and you deserve better." Looking into my eyes, her tone becomes harsher. "But everyone is out for themselves. You have to learn that. If you keep waiting for others to make things right for you, you'll be trapped in the life they design for you and not the one you want to lead. Nobody will ever know better than you what you want and need. You cannot live up to all the expectations people will have in you. And you don't have to. Instead of wondering all the time what you are expected to do, just do what you want for a change."

Wow.

Ooookay.

I... I feel a bit run over.

"Yes..." I say slowly. "I suppose you're right. I should. Let's just go. I don't want to talk about it anymore." I turn to leave but Rori hurries back to Goldanna's house. I frown. What is she up to now?

On the wall next to Goldanna's door there's one of the wanted posters that marks us kingslayers. Rori quickly looks to her left and right, then rips it off the wall and stuffs it into one of the satchels on her belt. "Sorry, but your sister is such a golddigger. I won't take the risk."

"No offense taken. But these posters are everywhere."

"Then let's get going before she sees or remembers one."
Rori and Goldanna gave me a lot to think about. Lost in thought I hardly pay attention to the road on our way from Denerim to the mysterious Haven that Brother Genitivi has disappeared to. Rori only groaned when she took a look at the map. "Once we're done we can write a traveller's guide to Ferelden."

It should be summer but it has been unexpectedly cold as if winter never truly ended. The sky is gloomy and dim most of the time, the sun seldomly breaking through. Duncan mentioned that's the first signs of a Blight, when the archdemon rises the sky turns grey. The harvest won't be a good one this year, next to the Blight Ferelden will have to face a famine if we can't end this soon. The more we are troubled by our slow progress.

When Zevran detects an abandoned barn a bit offside the main road, Rori decides it's time for a halt. While the elf takes a look around the rest of us begins to set up camp. We only just have unloaded our faithful packing horses when Zevran comes running back. "Soldiers on the road," he reports. "Twelve. Howe's men. They will be here shortly."

"They're on horseback?" Rori inquires.

"Yes, the whole lot of them."

"What do we do? Hide?" Leliana asks, already strapping the luggage back to the horses.

"No." Rori bites her lips and frowns.

"Run?" I suggest.

She takes a quick look around at the barn, a ramshackle hut with the roof having collapsed in some places. It still provides shelter if one isn't too choosy - and we aren't.

"Plan," Rori says.

The soldiers come riding down the path, a shortcut to Vigil's Keep as Rori, being accustomed to the area, explains. They are all heavily armoured, Howe's crest being clearly visible on their breastplates and shields. They don't pay much attention to the abandoned barn and are about to pass by when Rori jumps out from her hiding place.

"Hinges, you bloody treacherous bastard!" she shouts, standing in the middle of the road. She draws her sword, pointing it at the leader. "Get off your horse and fight, coward! I will make you pay for what you did to my family!" She really makes a show of it. Or maybe it isn't a show. Her fury is real and I do hope she has enough common sense to stick to her own plan of avoiding an open fight.

Hinges first is so surprised he is completely dumbfounded. At least he motions the soldiers to a halt. "My, my, who do we have here? The little Cousland brat. Arl Howe will be delighted when I present him your head."

"You'd have to get me first," Rori retorts, still pointing her blade at him. He could just ride her down - or shoot an arrow at her. In the name of the Maker, I do hope she knows what she's doing. "Better than you have tried and failed. And we all know you're not the brightest crayon in the box."

"Bitch!" Hinges grunts and for a moment it looks like he's going to charge. But then he really gets off his horse. Obviously Rori is right with him not being particularly intelligent.
"Catch her!" he orders his soldiers. "Alive. I want to have some fun with her before I cut her filthy tongue out and hand her over to Howe." The soldiers start climbing off their horses and run towards the girl. "The one who brings her to me can have his turn with her, too." He snorts out a laughter. "After I am done with her." He leers at Rori in a way that makes me want to punch that grin off his face.

"Keep dreaming," she hisses, then, before the first soldier can grab her, she sheathes her swords and in one fluid motion jumps over the ditch beside the road. She hauls herself over the fence and darts towards the barn.

A lithe little girl in a light leather armour is faster than a dozen men in heavy plate. Rori easily reaches her destination before them. She rushes through the open door of the barn, causing Hinges some amusement. "Now we got her!" he roars and storms in after her with his soldiers in tow. All of them but the two he has left back with the horses.

He really isn't the epitome of cleverness.

The moment the last one is through, Zevran leaves his hiding place right behind the open door and slams it shut. Sten emerges from behind the haycart and helps him lock it with a log. Nothing that will hold back the men for long, but hopefully long enough.

Meanwhile I charge the remaining soldiers, Leliana at my side. The one in front of me gives a startled cry and still tries to pull his sword form its sheath when I slam my shield at his head. He stumbles backward and I jump after him, running him through. His companion is fried by one of Morrigan's spells.

Leliana has difficulties to calm down the horses and two run off into the forest before Zevran, Sten and I come to her aid. Wynne we have left behind with our stuff. She is shouting advices at us from afar. Always a teacher.

I pull myself onto the back of a brown mare. I'd like to say in one fluent and graceful move. Actually... oh, well, let's just say I make it into the saddle somehow. Zevran runs after a fleeing horse that I doubt he has the slightest chance to... and there he's already on top of it, rushing it after the other horses. Leliana and he manage to round up the remaining horses while the two that have fled are lost.

I turn to the shed, uneasy because Rori is in there all alone with ten angry men. But the moment I begin stirring my horse towards the barn, she emerges through a hole in the roof, slides down one side and lets herself fall into the hay on the haycart.

I clip my shield to the saddle and push the horse forward to her side to pull her in the saddle behind me. The very moment she mounts, the door bursts open and with loud cries and shouts, the remaining soldiers spill out of the barn. The first is hit by one of Leliana's arrows, the following are even less fortunate when Morrigan's fireball explodes amongst them. The ones left standing pour out of the barn, coughing and cursing, where they are met by more of Leliana's arrows and by Sten and his sword. It's a nasty fight and it's over quickly.

With Rori's arms wrapped around my waist, I spur the horse to gallop and it rushes down the road to disappear in the forest, our companions following right behind.

I don't know whether I should be glad my armour prevents me feeling the softness of Rori's breasts pressed against my back or whether I should regret it. Maybe it's better that way. I want her so much my whole body aches with desire. I have never felt like this before and for a very long time now I have fought down this desire - because it's not right. The Chantry is rather strict about sexual
relationships. And for a templar, although it is not totally beyond question, the Chantry rather sees them devoted to their service instead of a woman.

But now I am thinking about it, I really don't get why I should deny myself what I want when Rori wants it, too. It's not that I am a templar anymore. It's not like my life has so many bright moments. I am glad and thankful that Rori is with me. I cannot imagine how I could endure all this without her. Sure, there'd be my duty as a Grey Warden - but honestly, it cannot be all about that, can it?

I have welcomed Duncan's decision to recruit me as a way out of the Chantry. I am still thankful and proud to be a Grey Warden. If given more choices maybe that wouldn't have been the one I would have made but as it is I cannot change anything about it anymore and have to make the best of it. And the best is Rori.

Whenever the gloom around us seems so thick it threatens to suffocate me, I only got to look at her. She just makes me smile for no other reason but being here with me. She makes me laugh when she jumps in on one of my verbal jesting combats. She is stubborn and bold and gutsy. Zevran once called her a ginger with heart and soul. He certainly has more experience than I have when it comes to redheads but I guess he's not that wrong there.

And she's beautiful. Maker's Breath, how beautiful she is! Those dark blue eyes that are a little too big for her pale heartshaped face, the pretty little freckles on her nose, the rosebud lips. She's busty for her height and built, slender and lithe. And I can't wait for that red hair of hers to grow longer. I wonder why she ever cut it off at all!

Oh, and her feet. I have never seen so pretty little feet. The grace she moves with - on those legs. Long and slender and... I could go on like this forever.

Fact is, I think I have fallen in love with her. Not that I know anything about that. But if this is not love, what else could it be? She gives my life a meaning - next to that of being a Grey Warden of course. But... this is a different meaning. This is for me. For me alone. And I do not want to deny myself anymore that little bit of happiness as long as I have the chance to enjoy it.

I am so lost in thought I can be glad my horse just follows its friends or Rori and I would end up anywhere just not where we should be. We pick up Wynne and push the horses until animal and men are so tired we cannot move on anymore.

"Now we don't have to walk all the way to Haven at least," Rori says cheerfully when she slips off the horse. Her smile turns into a grimace of pain and she clutches her leg. She's hurt. And she hasn't said a word until now. It's too dark to see her face but the way she sways she's close to collapsing.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I snap at her, picking her up. First it looks as if she's going to protest. Something like she's fine and she can perfectly walk on her own. But then she shuts her mouth and just leans her head against my shoulder.

"It's only a small cut," she mumbles. I can feel the sticky wetness that drenches her leather pants at her thigh. That's more than a small cut!

"Wynne!"

The granny mage has a stern expression while she sees to Rori's injuries. "Rest. I mean it. Rest," Wynne tells Rori once she is done casting her spell. I help the mage packing her healing supplies and carry them back to her tent for her.

"Well, thank you, Alistair." Wynne smiles and gives me a treat like I was a little boy. It's a chocolate
mabari and I decide to share it with Rori later. I pocket it and, shifting my weight uncomfortably, watch Wynne unfold her bedroll. She arches an eyebrow. "Is there something else?"

I look back at Rori next to the campfire. She has snuggled to her dog and listens to Leliana telling her a story. Merely looking at her gives me a fuzzy funny feeling. Does she feel the same when looking at me? "Sooo, what would you do if someone told you that they loved you?" I blurt out before I can stop myself.

"Check their eyesight first, perhaps. Is this someone I should know about?"

I sigh. "No. I mean, pretend you're a woman..."

"I am a woman, Alistair. That shouldn't be too hard, but I'll give it a try."

Blast it! I really should stop trying to seek advice from women. But who to ask then? Sten? I doubt he even knows what love is. "Ahhh, that's... not what I meant. Just... pretend you're another woman. And someone told you that they loved you. How would you react?" Nervously I wring my hands. I know what I feel but I don't know about Rori. So if I told her and she turned me down... ohhh, the mere thought gives me a heartache.

"Well, that depends," Wynne replies. "Does this someone just blurt it out? Do I love them back? I need context."

Maker's Breath! Why does she have to make it so complicated? "I... I don't know if you love them back. Maybe you do. You've... spent a lot of time with this person." And you've kissed him, hugged him, let him touch your breasts. Argh, now I have the image of Wynne naked in my mind and that's the last thing I want there. Sometimes I just hate my colourful imagination. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head to get rid of the pictures popping up in my mind.

"Perhaps you need to wait for the right moment? You could get her alone in camp, give her a gift perhaps."

"Oh, I wasn't talking about me... just... forget I said anything." I hurriedly blurt out. Stupid to even ask.

"As you wish," the mage chuckles. Grumbling to myself I stroll back to the campfire - and sit there for hours, watching Rori. I have the first watch and one after another the others go to bed - all but Rori. Soon enough I find myself resting at the campfire during my watch with Rori at my side. She claims she isn't tired but I guess she just takes the chance for a private moment. Her head rests in my lap and I lazily run my fingers through her curls while I try to make up my mind. It's only three little words I have to tell her. But everytime I open my mouth to say them, my tongue won't obey and I am left mute.

"Why in the name of the Maker did you cut them off?" I wrap one of those bright red curls around my index finger.

"I had to. They were scorched." I wait for her to give an explanation, stroking her hair in the meanwhile. The time it takes her for telling me I already can guess it's something about Highever. "When the castle was attacked," she finally says and like always when she talks of that night her voice is stripped off emotion, like she is not talking about something that happened to her but to someone else, "it was set on fire. With all the sparks and me not being able to pay much attention while fighting to stay alive, my hair caught fire and Mother tackled me to the ground to extinguish it. The hair was ruined but as long as that's all I had to suffer, I can call myself lucky."
My fingers keep stroking her hair and face when suddenly I feel something moist, a tiny droplet, then another. It's only then that I realize she's silently crying. Pulling her into my arms, I cradle her. I don't know how long I hold her that way. She relaxes and snuggles to me. It feels so right, so good. I can give her the comfort she needs and that makes me happy. I want to take care of her. And I can take care of her, no matter what Wynne says. Nobody ever said Grey Wardens cannot have lovers. Even Duncan didn't object back in Ostagar. He could have stopped me the moment he figured I showed interest in her.

That reminds me of what Rori said, about how I should take care of myself more.

"You know... I've been thinking..." How to say that?

"What have you been thinking about?" Rori prompts when my voice trails off. She has stopped crying and just enjoys my company.

"Glad you don't call it a rare occasion like Morrigan would have," I chuckle.

"Morrigan isn't as smart as she would like us to believe. But that's not what you wanted to talk about, right?"

"Back when we left Goldanna's you told me I needed to look out for myself more than I do. I'm beginning to think you were right. I need to stop letting everyone else make my decisions for me. I need to take a stand and think about myself for a change, or I'm never going to be happy."

"Don't let me influence you, Alistair. This is your life and you shouldn't just jump to a conclusion because of something I said."

"No, what you said made sense."

"Wow, a rare occasion then," Rori giggles.

"Oh, come on, you make sense to me always."

"Zevran."

Yeah, that still makes no sense to me. "Most of the time," I admit. "But you were right. I should be looking out for myself more." I hesitate. Could it be I misinterpreted her words? "Or didn't I understand you?"

"NO!" Rori cries and sits up so abruptly she slams her shoulder against my chin.

"Oww!" I rub my chin.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Does it hurt badly?" She gently runs her fingers across my skin, then leans in to place a soft kiss where she hit me. Then she straightens to look me in the eyes. The flames of the campfire make hers shine like dark pearls. "I meant it. You really should put yourself first more often. But you don't have to do what I say."

"I don't have to do it, I want to. What you said made sense. I should have done this a long time ago."

"No kidding!" she mumbles. "It's about time you get this."

"Hey!" I nudge her ribs gently but all I get from her as a response is a shrug and an impish grin. "I just wanted to thank you, being with you is the one bright spot out of everything that happened."

"Like a ray of light in the dark?" she suggests.
"Yeah, although that's a bit kitschy, don't you think?" I grin and she grins back at me, shrugging.

"Maybe, but that's what you are for me," she confesses, blushing deep crimson. She plucks a blade of grass and begins tearing it to tiny pieces. "You can also be a bright spot if you like that better," she blurts out after a moment of silence, her being the one to break it when we both begin to feel it growing heavy. "It's the same, I guess." Visibly forcing herself to meet my gaze, she takes a deep breath. "It all comes down to you being the best that has happened to me ever since... ever since I lost everything that was dear to me."

Oh.

I don't know what to say. I mean, I do know what to say. These three words. But I seem to have lost the ability of speaking. My heart does funny things in my chest. It beats so hard like it wants to break through my ribcage. At the same time it aches with joy. I've heard people talking about butterflies in their stomach and never really understood what they meant until now.

Maker's breath, I love that girl.

"So I should thank you, too, shouldn't I?" Rori doesn't give me the chance to think about my condition any longer. She kisses me and my ability to think is completely lost. Everything becomes fuzzy and this time I don't fight that feeling. All this time I've so tried not to lose control because I believed I should not enjoy her touch both because of what the Chantry taught me and because of my duty as a Grey Warden. Well, blast it!

I kiss her back so urgently it makes her gasp. She has mostly been the one to start whatever encounter we had after I first kissed her, dragging me along. She has been the one to ask me to her tent and I refused. I wouldn't now. But when I push her gently to lie on the ground and run my hands up her thighs, she winces.

I growl in frustration. That's my bloody blasted luck that she's hurt when I finally make up my mind.

"Sorry." I let go of her. And she sits back up to take a look at the bandage around her leg. There's fresh blood seeping through. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to..." Now I feel like a complete ass. How could I forget she was hurt?

"It's okay, really. Don't worry." I obviously don't look like I would believe her because she takes my face in her hands and kisses me softly. "No more sorries. I'll be fine. But I guess I should take a rest or Wynne will make sure that cut is the last thing for me to worry about."

"Then let me take you to your tent." I certainly won't let her limp there. I pick her up as carefully as I can and carry her across the camp to her tent.

"Thank you." She smiles. I smile back at her. I can't get rid of the feeling she wants to say something. She opens her mouth a few times but then shakes her head and in the end it's just her telling me goodnight.

Long after she's gone I sit there with a huge grin plastered across my face.

Maker's Breath, I love her..
Four days later we have rounded Lake Calenhad, heading towards Sulcher Pass. With Wynne's aid Rori has recovered quickly, although she had to endure a lot of scolding along the healing.

All this time I've been waiting. I had doubts and discarded them and now I think I am ready. Maybe. I look at my tent and the preparations I have made, wondering if I have overdone it. Now all I have to do is ask Rori.

She fights with her tent and Barkley who keeps tearing the tent down again everytime Rori has managed to halfway put it up. She scolds him and I swear that dog is laughing his ass off at her dog-style.

"No dog cookies for you tonight!" Rori finally snaps when she's had enough of that furry fool of a warhound. The dog whines in a truly heartbreaking way but Rori only glares him down. "Don't you look at me like that, you know you deserve it!" She points at the collapsed mess of her tent.

"Do you need a hand?" I ask. Not exactly the opening I have intended, especially since I want her in my tent tonight but you really don't just jump someone and ask them to sleep with you - not unless you are Zevran.

"Thanks, Alistair." Rori pulls at one end of the tent, waiting for me to pick up at the other. I do but stand there with the tarpaulin in hand, just staring at her pleadingly. Like she's going to guess what I want!

"Are you alright, Alistair?"

I take a deep breath and let go of her tent. "All right, I guess I really don't know how to ask you this."

"Ask me what?" Rori looks as confused and lost as I feel. "Are you sweating?" She closes the distance between us and examines me closely.

"No! I mean yes..."

"You aren't ill, are you?" She tiptoes to lay her hand to my forehead and test my temperature.

"I mean, I'm a little nervous, sure. Not that this is anything bad or frightening or... well yes."

"Okay, but you're not ill."

"Not that I know off." I sigh and rub my face. "Oh, how do I say this? You'd think it would be easier, but every time I'm around you I feel as if my head is about to explode. I - I can't think straight."

"Oh. Thanks a lot." Rori laughs. "That's some compliment for sure."

"I don't mean it like that," I hurry to explain. "I mean... all right, let me start over."

"Sure, take your time. Do you want to take a sear?"

"No, no thank you. I rather stand." I pace, trying to collect my thoughts which is really pretty hard to do when she has taken off her armour, wearing that tight fitting blouse that so emphasizes her bosom. I don't know if she realizes how hot she looks. "Here's the thing being near you makes me crazy, but
I can't imagine being without you," I finally blurt out. "Not ever."

"That's good because I don't plan leaving you alone," Rori smiles. She watches me pace with a hint of amusement in her eyes. At least this is fun for her.

"You don't?"

"Nope. I enjoy your company too much. So in case you want to get rid of me, you have to run me off."

"Well, this won't happen." I have lost my chain of thought again. It takes me a moment of sheepishly grinning at her until I can recover it. "I don't know how to say this another way..." Here it comes. "I want to spend the night with you." She looks stunned. "Here, in the camp." Well, where else? "Maybe this is too fast, I don't know, but... I know what I feel."

"You want to spend the night with me?" She blinks at me. At least she didn't say no right away. "Are you sure? I mean... that's... I thought you'd rather wait?"

"I wanted to wait for the perfect time, the perfect place... but when will it be perfect? If things were we wouldn't even have met. We sort of... stumbled into each other, and despite this being the least perfect time, I still found myself falling for you in between all the fighting and everything else. I really don't want to wait anymore. I've... I've never done this before. You know that. I want it to be with you... while we have the chance. In case..."

"Don't talk like that," she says forcefully. "There will always be time later."

"Will there?" I wish I had her confidence. "You don't know that. I don't know that. I'd like to be able to say I threw caution to the wind at least once."

"Isn't that my job? Throwing caution to the wind and doing unexpected scandalous things?" Rori laughs when she pounces me. I catch her, embracing her. I take it this is a yes. "Shouldn't you kiss me now?"

"What here? With everybody watch..." She doesn't even give me the chance to end that sentence. Boisterous little vixen.

Once we break the kiss I take her hand and lead her to the shore of the lake. There, a little off shore, is a small island, or maybe it's just a sandbank. The point is, it's a bit more private than in the middle of our camp. So I have set up my tent on that sandbank between the blackthorn and birch trees growing there. They are like a natural wall, surrounding an open spot just big enough for a tent and a campfire. The water is shallow and it's easy to wallow through. I pick Rori up anyway to carry her across.

"Always the gentleman," she laughs when I put her back down ever so gently.

"A gentleman with very wet feet."

"Poor darling." She wraps her arms around my neck, tiptoes and kisses me gently. "Let's get you out of these wet boots then."

"Sounds good to me." I plant a kiss on the back of her hand, then lead her to the small clearing where my tent sits. My knees are so wobbly I'm afraid I'll never get there.

"Oh," Rori gasps when she steps through the gap in the bushes. The campfire is blazing, spreading its warmth and in the branches there are little paper lanterns that Bodhan complained he would never
sell to anybody. He was so surprised when I asked him for them that he gave them to me for free. "This... is beautiful," she exclaims.

"You are beautiful," I breathe, turning her around to face me. "And I love you." Suddenly it doesn't seem so hard anymore to tell her how I feel. I run my fingertips down the side of her face and neck, gently tucking a lose strand behind her ear.

"I love you, too," she whispers and her eyes shine brightly when she says these words. She beams at me with a happiness that reflects my own.

Now I am here with her I don't know what to do next. It should be so easy. It should come so naturally but I am so nervous.

"I..." I stammer but Rori effectively silences me with a kiss. I might not know what to do and she doesn't have any more experience. While this makes me hesitate, she just gives it a try to see where it will take her.

She nibbles my lips when we break the kiss for breathing. Her arms are wrapped around my neck, mine tightly around her waist. When she kisses me again instead of tiptoeing she just pulls herself up and wraps her legs around my waist. Still kissing her, deeply, urgently I stumble towards the tent, manage not to trip over anything and we both fall through the opening onto the blankets and furs. Her hands tear at my shirt, pulling it over my head. I struggle to get rid of my wet boots without letting go of Rori - and find it impossible. She giggles and gives me a hand. Pulling the boots and socks off my feet she throws them unceremoniously out of the tent. Propped up on my elbows I lie on my back in front of her, only dressed in my leather pants now. Her eyes are dark and hungry as she roams her gaze over me.

When she reaches for the breech of my pants I catch her hand. "Slowly," I gasp. This is supposed to be a precious moment. I don't want to hurry through this. She leans back and allows me to undress her. First her jackboots with the low wedge heels. I chuckle when I see she wears her rainbow coloured striped archdemon socks. Once her feet are bare I cup them in my hands. They are so small and delicate. I tenderly run my fingers across her instep - and almost get kicked in the face when she squeals and tries to get away from my touch, giggling.

"Don't!" she gasps.

"Ticklish?" I grin mischievously and Rori pales visibly.

"Don't you dare!"

But I do. I catch her by both her ankles before she can escape and let my fingers dance across her feet. She squeaks and squirms. It's impossible to keep a hold of her so I let go and push her back to lie on the blankets, pinning her down with my weight while I poke her in her side and tickle her under her arms until she can hardly breathe anymore from all the giggling.

"You... are... so... mean!" she gasps once I release her. She's so beautiful lying there with her face all flushed and her eyes shining with tears of laughter.

"Mhmmm." Slowly I pull at the laces of her blouse, opening them one by one, revealing more and more of her delicately pale skin. The cloth is so tight over her busty bosom that her breasts bounce out of their constriction once freed. The rosy tips of her nipples immediately harden in the chill of the night breeze. I push back the urge to touch her but move on unlacing her blouse and then slipping her out of it. Running my hands up her bare arms and down her sides, I carefully undo the breech of her leather pants that hug her hips. I tug the pants down and cast them aside. My heart is beating like
a battle drum when I hook my fingers at the sides of her panties and slowly pull them down. I don't even dare to look now, closing my eyes.

I can feel the smoothness of her skin against my fingers all the way down her legs. I can hear the thundering of my heart ringing in my ears. When I open my eyes again she lies in front of me naked with a blush on her cheeks and her huge blue eyes staring at me timidly. I drink in the sight of her but it seems to make her nervous because she crosses her legs and tries to cover her breasts with her arms.

"Maker's Breath, you are beautiful," I whisper and she relaxes. Was she really afraid I couldn't like what I see? I tend to forget she is as inexperienced as I am because she often is so bold and straightforward.

Her skin isn't flawless. The battles against the darkspawn have left scars on her body that even magic couldn't extinguish. I don't care. To me it makes her even more beautiful.

I lean down to kiss her, nipping her lips. I trail kisses across her jawline and gently nibble her earlobe, eliciting her the cutest mewing noises.

"Keep still," I tell her when she tries to capture my lips again. I want to get to know her, every inch of her beautiful body. She growls but obeys and simply rests her hands on my shoulders while I nip the side of her neck, kiss her collarbones and flick my tongue at the hollow of her throat. I move my mouth down her cleavage to her soft mounds. One hand cupping her left breast, my thumb strokes her hardened rosy pebble while I tenderly suck at her right breast. The moment my tongue flicks against her nipple, she moans so beautifully it sends a shiver down my spine and lights a fire within my loins. Her fingers dig into my shoulders and she squirms under my ongoing assault.

Can't be so wrong when that's how she reacts.

I switch to her left breast, causing her to growl in disapproval until I start the caress once more, sucking and nibbling at her nipple. She gasps, and her fingers entangle with my hair. Her other hand runs down my back, her nails scratching my skin.

My hand roams the flat of her belly until it reaches that little patch of soft red hair between her legs. My fingers stroke her curls tenderly, but I hesitate to move on, not sure if I can dare.

"Alistair, please!" Rori bucks her hips, snarling in frustration.

Seems I can dare.

And I should. For my own sake.

I slip my fingers between her legs. It's moist there and hot. I don't want to hurt her. I have never touched a woman there before and I didn't even know what they really looked like down there. Well, I did but not really in detail. I slide my fingers across the soft slick folds, feeling my way around. I do hope she doesn't mind my inexperienced fumbling that should introduce me to her anatomy.

She doesn't mind. Not at all. Especially not when my fingers find that little spot that feels like a tiny hard pebble. Rori groans and bucks her hips when I rub it for a try. Listening to her and paying attention to the reactions of her body, I figure sucking her nipples and rubbing that tiny pebble between her legs gets her real excited. And my excitement grows with hers. A hot liquid pools between her legs, coming from that small slit I carefully stretch with the tip of my index finger.

Rori whimpers and squirms, when I drive my finger deeper inside of her. It's almost too much to bear and for a moment I'm afraid I'll come simply by the feeling of that moist velvet tightness around my
finger.

Rori has given up on even trying to keep still. She bites down on my shoulder when I begin to move my finger inside of her, my thumb still assaulting the tiny pebble, my mouth caressing her breasts. Her breathing is ragged, broken by those little mewing noises she makes. I feel her muscles tensing, her whole body stiffens, she arches her back to press herself into my touch - and then she cries out my name and a shiver runs through her before she collapses back to the blankets.

She gasps and whimpers, her face is flushed and she lies there with her eyes closed, trembling lightly.

"Are... are you okay?" I ask shyly, not sure exactly of what has just happened. Whatever I did, it had to be good because she lunges herself at me, pulls me down to kiss her and at the same time she tears at the breech of my pants. She rubs my hardness through the material of my pants, making me groan.

I so want her, want to be inside her, it's almost unbearable.

Rori curses when the breech won't open and she sits up, pushing me to lie on my back. She impatiently pulls and tears at my pants with shaking hands until I take pity of her and help her undo the laces and get rid of my pants and underwear to free my erection.

The moment my length becomes visible to her, Rori freezes and stares. She looks... shocked?

"What? What is wrong?" I ask, alarmed now.

"Nothing...", she says a bit too quickly. I don't believe her. Something is absolutely not okay. One moment she was all over me, now she's looking almost frightened, timid for sure. "It's... everything is fine. I... I just didn't think it would be so very... huge!"

What?!

We both stare down at my erection.

Awkward.

"Do you think it's not as it should be? Is there something wrong with it?" I sound as panicked as I feel.

"How should I know?" Rori whines.

Yeah, how should she. As far as I know from listening to guy talk, when it comes to their most private parts, big is good. I've had to endure countless tiny-manshod-jokes told by Ser James, the most lecherous templar I have ever met, but honestly I never have wasted much thought on my... size. Now I look at myself and wonder if there's something odd about me. I feel panic rising inside me. "Oh, blast it!"

"No, no, Alistair, it's perfect," Rori tries to calm me down. At least that shocked expression has disappeared from her face. "You are perfect. I didn't mean to... I was just wondering how it should fit..."

This is not bound to soothe me. Quite the contrary. I wince when she reaches out for me. "Maybe we should forget about this. I don't want to hurt you," I gasp, mortified by the mere thought.

"You won't," Rori says firmly. She wears that determined defiant expression of hers. I'm not convinced.
"But..."

"Really, you won't. Everything is fine."

"But..."

Rori has a way shutting me up by kissing me. It certainly is very effective. She doesn't give me a chance to worry any longer about my size and her tightness. She just grabs me by my shoulders and kisses me fiercely.

I try to resist.

I really do.

For a second.

Maybe two.

Then I'm lost.

My hands roam her body and hers roam mine. The sound of our moans of pleasure add to the music of the night, the chirping of the crickets and the crackling of the fire. The water of the lake splashes softly at the shore and somewhere a lawny owl coos. I feel the heat of Rori's body against mine, feel the smoothness of her satin skin and the softness of her bosom and buttocks. When her hand circles around my hard shaft, I groan loudly. Rori immediatelly pulls back.

"Did I hurt...?"

"No," I growl and take her hand to make her touch me again. She does as pleaded and gently strokes her hand up and down my length, squeezing it testingly. It's almost more than I can endure. I can feel the tension rise inside me that comes before the ultimate relief and I have to stop her before I reach that point.

Gently urging her legs apart, I position myself between them and press my glans at her entrance. She lifts her hips to meet me and I slowly slide into her. First it goes smoothly until I meet a resistance I have to push through. She whimpers when I put more pressure on her and I freeze. That wasn't one of her whimpers of pleasure. It was one of pain.

"Rori?"

"I'm fine. Don't stop," she whispers, her arms wrapped around my neck she clings to me, trembling lightly. I push gently and she whimpers again. Finally it dawns on me that I am about to rip through her maidenhead. I didn't realize it would hurt her.

"Rori... we don't have to..."

"Alistair, please!" She bucks against me, wrapping her legs around my waist to push me forward. "Now," she whispers, then kisses me urgently. I thrust into her and she cries into my mouth. It feels awful to hurt her - and at the same time the sensation of her tightness around me is mindnumbing. I groan, resting there inside her to let the pain ebb and to still myself. I'm not going to last long that way. It's already unbearable.

Her squirming urges me to move and I do. But three thrusts later I cannot hold back anymore. It's absolutely impossible and my release causes me to cry out in frustration and shame.
I can't believe I messed this up for her.

I am such a loser.

I feel like crying when I collapse on top of her - but really, that wouldn't make the impression she has to have of me any better.

I close my eyes, my face burns with shame. "Sorry," I mumble, burying my face at her neck. She doesn't say a word and I recoil inwardly, trying to pull out of her.

Rori won't let me, though.

She wraps her legs so tightly around my waist I cannot get away. Doesn't she know my poor performance is over? Now she even lifts my head to make me look at her. It cannot get worse, can it?

"Rori, I can't..." I protest, then, stunned by the warmth and love in her eyes, I fall silent.

"I love you," she whispers, then nips my lower lip before kissing me for real. Her hands stroke down my back first soothingly, then with a more and more passionate touch. I cannot lift my weight off her when she won't let go of me, so I roll us both around, putting her on top of me.

She sits up and we both gasp in unison when this drives me even deeper inside her. I lie on my back, enjoying the view of her busty bosom hovering above me. I have to admit this new position has definitely some positive aspects. Even more when my body reacts to the sensations Rori elicits inside of me. Her eyes grow wide and round when she feels it, too, and my hardness stretches her tight inner walls once more.

"Oh," Rori gasps when she sways her hips testingly. She begins to move, searching for a rhythm. It's excruciatingly slow first, picking up speed when her excitement grows tighter and the tension rises inside of her. Her head tilted back, her back arched, she rides me, moaning softly with every motion.

Maker have mercy, and let me last longer this time!

First I do not dare to move as not to spoil this again for her. But it proves absolutely impossible to stay still and soon I join in, and adjusting to her rhythm, I meet her with my thrusts, reaching up I cup her breasts and pinch her nipples. She whimpers softly, then a loud moan escapes her.

I am intrigued by the look on her face, her lips slightly parted and her eyes closed with her eyelids fluttering softly, she looks completely lost in her pleasure like the world around her has stopped existing and it's only her and me making love in my tent.

She's so slick and wet, and still so excruciatingly tight and hot. What feels like a blaze in my loins slowly begins to spread through my entire body into a mindnumbing sizzle that soon becomes so tense I can hardly endure it anymore. It's the sweetest torture.

I sense the tension in Rori rising with mine. Her breathing has become ragged, her moans come out in little gasps and whimpers, and her rhythm has grown urgent, the thrusting of her hips more forceful.

"Alistair," she breathes, her eyes fluttering open and her gaze meets mine. Her hands resting flat on my chest, she urges me to meet her and growls in frustration when it's not yet enough. I grab her by her hips and turn us both around once more without breaking the contact. Being on top of her again, I lift her legs to my shoulders, making her raise her hips for me. Then I thrust into her, harder and faster with every move. Passion and her cries of pleasure spur me on.
Someone grunts and growls her name and it takes me a while to realize that's me. My mind isn't working anymore. I am reduced to the one need of pounding her and give us both the release we seek.

It comes first for Rori, her body stiffening, all muscles tense. Then with a cry of relief, I feel her tighten around me, a spasm running through her and clenching me inside of her. It's too much to bear and she pulls me over the edge with her.

I roar her name and collapse.

Entangled with each other we lie on the soft blankets and furs. Sweat drying on our naked bodies in the chill of the night breeze and the warmth radiating from the campfire. I brush a damp curl from Rori's forhead and kiss her brow. She snuggles closer when I pull a blanket around us.

I am so utterly spent, so incredibly happy, tingling with satisfaction and more relieved than words can ever say that I didn't mess up again.

"Hmmm, you know according to all the sisters in the monastery, I should have been struck by lightning by now," I chuckle, kissing her knuckles one by one.

"It could still happen." We both look up to the clear night sky above, littered with the sparkling dots of far away stars.

"Sure, but if you get hit by the lightning afterwards it hardly seems like an effective deterrent."

"Not at all." We listen to the cirkets and the lawny owl and wait. "Maybe nobody has noticed? We could try again and see what happens?" Rori suggest.

"You are insatiable, you know that?"

"That's really nothing you should complain about."

"I'm not!" I laugh and kiss her softly. "I know who have noticed for sure. No way they could have not heard us. You do realize the rest of our little party here is going to talk, right? They do that."

Rori snorts. "First smart comment and I feed them to the darkspawn."

"See, that's why I love you!" I chuckle. "So what now, where do we go from here?" I'm not sure if I'm talking about our relationship. I haven't really made up my mind about where this is going to lead. Not when it's so unlikely there will be a future for us with the Blight and everything looming over us.

"Just right now at that very moment I have no intention to go anywhere." Rori yawns and snuggles even closer. It's so cozy beneath that blanket with her. I feel like dozing off and certainly not like going anywhere as well. "Just maybe go find something to eat," she adds. The Grey Warden appetite. Or maybe everybody feels hungry after having made love. Without another word, I turn and pull a basket from the back of the tent. Rori's eyes widen and she eagerly begins to rummage through it. "And tomorrow... well, we still have a darkspawn horde to defeat."

"You're so practical. You make me proud." I laugh.

"And we'll defeat them together. We stay together no matter what happens," Rori says matter of factly.

"Right, I can handle that. I hope."
"I hope so, too."

"You realize one of us could die, though. We both could die." I don't want to destroy this moment but I'm afraid the way she denies this possibility she could be overwhelmed if anything happened to me. If you deal with this before then you can cope easier, can't you?

"I won't die." She says it so stubbornly that I almost feel sorry for whoever is going to try prove her wrong. "Neither will you." Who am I to protest? Maybe she needs to believe that after all. At least she doesn't seem worried at all the way she examines the food in the basket. "Cherries! Where did you get those?"

"Climbed over a fence and stole them," I admit, feeling a bit guilty.

"And isn't that Sten's cookies? I'm bad influence, it seems." Rori laughs. The next fifteen minutes we spend in companionable silence, eating cherries and trying to spit the cherry stones through the opening of the tent into the campfire. We both miss most of the time.

"Good thing we don't have to fight the darkspawn with cherry stones," Rori giggles when we settle back down in my tent, her safely in my arms.

"Have I told you that I love you?" I whisper sleepily in her ear. "I did? Well, it won't hurt you to hear it again, will it?"

"Not at all. You are free to repeat it whenever you want," she grins. "And I love you, too."

"See, was that so hard?"

"Never said it was," she mumbles, already half asleep.
She looks... shocked? Art by Notevensorry.
Alistair's First Night. Art by Erusel.
The Morning After

With a startled cry I escape from the nightmare. It's dark, with only a soft reddish glow somewhere at the corner of my eyes. For a moment I don't know where I am and frantically begin to grab around for my sword to defend myself against whatever could sneak upon me. That's when someone gently takes my hands.

"Hush," Rori whispers softly. Letting go of my hands she caresses my cheek. I lean into her touch, closing my eyes. I only realize I'm trembling when she embraces me and begins to run her fingers through my hair calmly. She sings to me, a soft and sad tune. I have only heard her sing once before for Cailan when we paid our last respect to him. She has a beautiful singing voice. It's not as sweet as Leliana's. You can hear her Orlesian upbringing in her songs, whereas Rori's voice is like the rough and wild lands of Highever, beautiful but fierce. It's a voice that carries the echoes of misty mountains and dark woods, of deep waters and the grey sea. It's a voice made for the music of fiddles, bagpipes and drums.

I rest my head in her lap and listen to her sing of clear skies and cold winds, of the dark green forests and the creatures of old living there. She strokes my hair gently all through her song, chasing the images of the nightmare away. I feel save. And beloved. I've never had anybody to love me unconditionally. My mother died, my father didn't care. For my sister I am useless unless I give her money. Now, for the first time in my life there's this one person who really cares about me. Not because I'm a king's son or because of some oath or obligation. Not because we fight for the same cause. For the very first time I am loved simply for being who I am.

When she finishes her song, I sit up to kiss her. And then I make love to her again. This time without the fear of failure, the nervousness and awkwardness that was part of our first encounter. It was still beautiful. So very beautiful it makes my heart ache in that fuzzy warm way that comes with the fluttering in my stomach. This time it's all tenderness and pleasure. We don't say a word but let our bodies sing to each other. And I am truly united with her in body, heart and soul.

Afterwards she lies in my arms and we watch the night turn grey as the stars fade.

"Your song was beautiful," I mumble sleepily. "Why don't you sing more often?"

She draws patterns on my bare chest again with her index finger. I patiently wait for an answer, expecting it to come when I wonder if she has fallen asleep. "I don't know. I used to... back in Highever," Rori finally says. "Mother wanted to teach me something ladylike. Embroidery, weaving, playing the lute, fancy court dances, all that kind of cultivated things. But I proved a total failure." I can hear her sad smile. "Mother totally couldn't stand Arlessa Howe. She always gave her my embroideries or tapestries as gifts, acting as if they weren't completely ugly. There maybe is still some proof of my lacking talent in Vigil's Watch, hidden in some dark corner, but still there in case the teyrna showed up so they could hang it somewhere for her to see."

She speaks with fond amusement of her mother but the grief makes her voice husky. I kiss the top of her head, holding her for comfort.

"Then father had mercy and gave me a fiddle and I was allowed to learn the folk dances and music of Highever. Mother said a lady shouldn't sing drinking songs about sailors. Papa used to tease her about it because Mama knew more sailor songs than anybody else. During the war against the usurper she sailed her own warship, you know. I liked these songs and in the end they let me sing and play the music I wanted. Papa always said I am too much like my mother and she shouldn't try make me be someone I am not. I don't know why I stopped singing. Maybe because of the
memories. There are so many of them."

I recall having told her Duncan was from Highever. I said I would like to do something to honour him, return there and set up a statue or something. But it didn't occur to me then what she has lost there. She doesn't even know what happened to her parents after their deaths, if they had a proper funeral. I very much doubt so and I at least have enough common sense not to mention it to her now. But I make a silent promise to accompany her when she returns after all this is over. I am not going to leave her alone - if fate allows me to.

We drift back to sleep once more and when we wake, the sun is already high in the sky. Not that this makes it any warmer. I feel reluctant to get up all because of Rori. She looks adorable and sleepy, her hair tousled and cheeks blushed.

"We have to get up. We still have an archdemon to slay," I yawn.

"Let someone else kill that stupid oversized lizard," Rori murmurs and pulls the blanket over her head.

"There's nobody else there," I remind her, poking her side teasingly.

"Oh, blast!" she curses, her voice muffled by the blanket. "And don't you dare tickling me again, Alistair!"

In the end we are driven out of bed by our rumbling stomachs. We go skinny dipping in the lake - well, I go and then have to wade back to the shore and pull Rori in because she stands there, poking one toe into the water and claiming that she rather stinks like a whole horde of darkspawn than taking a bath in that icy water. There's a lot of squealing and squeaking, she kicks and curses and giggles. But in the end she's all clean, though wet and thoroughly cold.

"Now I want to go back to bed," Rori complains with chattering teeth when she wades back to the shore. "There it at least was warm."

Awww, she's pouting.

"The others certainly have cooked coffee," I point out. Rori celebrates her first cup of coffee in the morning. If there's something that can coax her out of bed then it's the promise of coffee.

We get dressed and I try to prepare myself inwardly for the smart comments that certainly await us. Rori doesn't seem to care. Or maybe it's just lack of coffee.

"Coffee," she groans. "Hopefully they didn't let Sten cook it or we won't be able to get any sleep for the next three days. Sten's coffee would revive a dead ogre."

When we reach the camp, the elf, Leliana and the witch have gathered around the fire. Zevran's grin is so wide and knowing, I blush simply from him staring at us. Leliana unsuccessfully tries to hide her smirk behind her mug.

"Did you sleep well?" she asks sweetly.

"Did you sleep at all?" Zevran chuckles. "Ahhh, the stamina of the youth."

Morrigan rises as soon as she sees us and thrusts a mug with a steaming liquid at Rori.

"Ohhhh, coffee!" Rori's expression brightens. "Thank you, Morrigan!" She immediately takes a sip - and spits it out even faster. "Ewww, bah! That's no coffee! What is it?" She glares at the dark liquid
in the mug.

"A contraceptive," Morrigan says smuggly. Rori's eyes grow wide and she stares at the witch, her cheeks burning hot with embarrassment. "You wouldn't want him to impregnate you, would you?"

"Uhm... errr..." Rori looks from Morrigan to me to the mug, back at the witch and at me again. I just stand there and look stupid while I wish to be somewhere else.

"You have an archdemon to defeat," Morrigan points out. "And there's enough idiots running around in this world. We don't have to add another one."

"Hey! Why do you always go on about how stupid I am? I'm not stupid, am I?" I feel stupid right now but that doesn't mean I am stupid, right? I look at Rori for some comfort and encouragement but she's busy staring at the mug.

"If you need to ask the question..." Morrigan sighs unnervedly. "Come on, Rori, drink this. A man who has to ask such questions should not replicate. I'd not even give him the chance to do so, but it seems you aren't very picky."

"Because it hurts my manly feelings, you know. All one of them," I sulk. More than her claiming I am stupid, it hurts that she doesn't think me good enough for Rori. I have my own doubts if I deserve her at all. I do not need someone else to fuel this insecurity.

"Then I'll be sure to write you an apology once all of this is over."

"I was educated by the Chantry," I sullenly point out. "I studied history. They don't make stupid templars."

"Then I must have been mistaken. I'm very impressed."

"No you're not. You're not even listening to me." I pout.

"My, you are smarter than you look after all. Your Chantry must have been very proud." She's so mean! Mean. Meaner. Morrigan.

"Don't worry, Alistair, my friend, you found your way into a beautiful woman's bed and that's really all you got to know in life," Zevran chuckles and pats my back. It still makes me jump every time he does that. He's a sneaky assassin. The type that usually backstabs you when you last expect it.

Rori still stares at the mug. "It's awful!" she complains.

"Like your taste in men," Morrigan snaps and crosses her arms in front of her chest. "Drink it!"

"I doubt there's much of a chance that you... uhm... that anything happens." I mumble.

"Is that so?" Morrigan arches an eyebrow. "Now, that would be some real improvement if idiots were naturally infertile."

I poke my tongue out at her, causing her to snort. "Two Grey Wardens having a child together - that's very unlikely," I explain

"Really?" Rori pushes the mug back at Morrigan. "Why so? Is this one more privilege of being a Grey Warden that I haven't yet heard about?"

"It's known of Grey Wardens having children - but either they already had them before they joined or they had them with someone not part of the order. The taint in our blood makes it almost
impossible to have a child. Two Grey Wardens together, that's probably never going to happen. I cannot believe I am discussing Rori's and my possibilities of having a child together right here in front of everybody.

"Oh. That would explain..." That's all Rori says. I could swear there was a shadow cast over her eyes for a moment. But it's gone when she cheerfully declares. "Lucky me! Or I'd have to gulp down that awful brew every day."

"As you wish," Morrigan huffs, pouring the contraceptive away. "But don't say I haven't warned you."

"I've had enough to swallow already." Rori pulls a face.

That last sentence causes Zevran to burst into a roaring laughter. "She's had enough to swallow," he chuckles, nudging Leliana's side. "Such a good girl, swallows it all." The bard giggles so hard, she gets a hiccups. Rori is as confused as I am.

"What? What did I say?"

Nobody is offering to explain and all I can do is shrug. I don't like the way the bard and the elf grin at us.

"Awww, look at them. All flushed and embarrassed," Leliana squeals. "Aren't they cute? You are so cute!"
All day long I can't take my eyes off Rori. The thoughts I keep having when watching her are all about making love to her. Everything she says or does just turns me on. I have never wished so badly for us to set up camp. It's a good thing I wear a suit of plate armour or I'd drag her off into the bushes anytime we halt for a rest. But as it's not like you can just shrug out of such an armour easily, it proves to be a rather effective chastity belt.

So I am forced to behave like a good boy and just stare. Rori doesn't make things easier for me when she kisses me. And she does that a lot. Whenever she gets the chance actually. And she doesn't care about who is watching. It's like the world around us ceases to exist for her. And then she does things like knocking her knuckles at my armour and say something like "I can't wait to get you out of this." or "Don't you wish we were somewhere more private. Only you and me together?" or "I want you to make love to me tonight."

It's excruciating.

I still expect to get struck by lightning with all the dirty thoughts I keep having.

"Might I offer you a bit of advice, my good friend Alistair?" I almost jump at the sound of the elf's voice. Blast, he's some sneaky bastard. If he had intended to murder me he'd have probably succeeded. He has been eyeing me for a while but as Rori has been keeping me company, he has not spoken to me. Now she is talking to a distressed merchant about some golem control rod he desperately wants her to have, the elf takes his chance.

When we have become good friends I do not know but advice from Zevran doesn't sound like a good idea. "I like my hair the way it is, thank you." I answer curtly, hoping to end any further discussion or conversation.

"Truly?"

Hey! My hairdo is certainly better than his with the ridiculous braids to emphasize his pointy ears. Actually, I have to admit, I'm rather vain. My hair, shaving every day. Rori was right when she pointed out that I do know that I'm handsome. Not that it helps much because I am also rather awkward. Well, she seems to like me well enough the way I am. And that makes me grin like a fool every time I think about it.

Zevran shakes his head. "As you wish... though my advice is regarding something else completely. It has to do with your recent... exertions with your fellow Grey Warden that I overheard."

"My...? Oh." Someone please tell me this is not happening. I did fear it would because... well, Rori wasn't exactly quiet when we made love. Not at all quiet. I tried to be quiet. But I guess I didn't pay much attention to how loud I was when things became... steamy. And of course someone had to hear - but... that they would talk about it that openly... This is private! But I guess nothing really is when travelling together and sleeping in tents in the middle of nowhere. I've had some very unpleasant run ins with my companions that I could have well lived on without. I know the colour of Wynne's knickers because she uses to dry them on a washing line she hangs between trees. I've seen Sten's naked butt when he crawled out of his tent one morning. I still believe this did a permanent damage to my eyesight. Zevran in my opinion has a serious problem with keeping himself properly covered. He seems to believe there's nothing wrong with running around completely nude with only a towel wrapped around his hips. A towel that keeps slipping. To my utter relief Ferelden proves to be too cold for the Antivan elf and he is forced to actually dress again after a short time.
Top of the list of worst things ever to happen during all the time travelling with my companions was when I accidentally walked in on Morrigan shaving her legs. I shouldn't have remarked they were as hairy as a spider's because that's when she shapeshifted into a giant spider and chased me back to the camp. Boy, I've never run that fast!

I look around for an escape but Wynne and Leliana have vanished behind the bushes and Sten rummages through his backpack and finds his cookies missing. It's never a good idea to talk to Sten when he has lost his cookies. Especially since this time I am the culprit. So that leaves Morrigan. No way she's going to aid me.

"It did seem as if you just got going when all grew quiet. You are... feeling all right, yes? Perhaps you are tired?"

What? Yes, I am tired. I hardly got any sleep. But really... that's none of his business. "We aren't talking about this, are we? Did I hit my head?"

The elf is merciless. He probably thinks he's doing me a favour. "I have some roots from home that you may chew if you need energy. As for volume, perhaps you ought to try arching your..."

"Whoa! Whoa! Awkward!" I hold up my hands in defense and retreat.

"You Fereldans are so finicky. How will you ever learn how to pleasure each other unless you talk about it?"

"Not listening! La la la la la!" I stick my fingers in my ears. Zevran rolls his eyes.

"That's what one gets for wanting to help. No thank you, no reward." Zevran shakes his head uncomprehendingly. Yes, we Fereldans stubbornly refuse to discuss our love life with strangers. Or almost strangers. Actually with anybody who is not an active part of said love life. At least I like to handle it that way.

I've only just lost my... err... virginity... yesterday. Thinking about it, I recall that awkward moment when Rori first saw my erection. I am still not sure if there really is everything fine with it. For a very very brief moment I am tempted to ask Zevran about the proper size of... err... manly... unm... appendages. But then I imagine how he goes "Well, let me have a look." And the mere thought of having to unpack in front of the elf makes me recoil. If anything is wrong with me then Rori at least didn't complain and after my first failure it worked just fine. So it doesn't really matter if there's anything odd about me, right? Rori was the first woman I've spent the night with and if I can have it my way she'll be the last anyway.

Zevran is still standing there, looking at me expectantly but since I do pretend he is not there, he finally gives up. And off he strolls to seek out Rori.

Doom!

DOOM!

He cannot possibly talk to her about... I groan. I guess Rori and I do the kind of stuff that only Zev would talk about.

I am rooted to the spot by mere shock, watching Zevran take Rori's arm and pull her away from the merchant. He intently talks to her and her first confusion turns into embarrassment quickly. She could just leave but instead she makes the mistake of asking a question - and by her expression regrets it instantly.
I am about to rescue her but by now Zevran has taken hold of the control rod Rori received from the merchant and moves his hands up and down its smooth sides. Rori blinks and so do I. That's not about what I think then, is it? Could he possibly be talking about the control rod and the golem? Next Zevran begins licking the knobbly end of the rod. I have no clue what this is about, but Rori is a brighter shade of pink. She's probably blushing from head to toe. So this is about something dirty? Zevran after a short explanation begins to suck at the control rod. Rori looks as if her eyes are about to pop out of their sockets when the elf shoves half of the rod down his throat. Is this some circus trick? She squeezes her eyes shut and sticks her fingers in her ears, singing lalalala loudly to herself. Zevran rolls his eyes and hands the rod back to her. She takes with two fingers as if it was something awfully gross. Well, it's for sure covered with elf spittle. Growling to himself, Zevran leaves her alone.

"I will never be able to look at this rod without blushing," she comments when I join her. She looks a bit shaken.

"What was this all about?" I inquire curiously.

"Cocks," Rori remarks dryly. She wipes the rod off with some wet leaves.

"We're not talking about roosters, right?" I ask carefully.

"Not at all."

"Then what was it about?"

"Why don't you ask Zevran?" Rori innocently flutters her eyelashes at me. "He certainly will love to explain it to you, too."

"Uhm... I'd rather not." Rori still holds the control rod in her hands, undecided what to do with it. "You don't really want to use that rod, do you?" She stares at me in blank horror. "To activate the golem, I mean."

"Uhm... why not? A golem could be rather useful. They are made of stone, so we wouldn't have to worry it could be infected by the darkspawn corruption."

"Do you think you could control it?"

"If I don't then maybe Wynne or Morrigan."

"I don't know if I like the idea of Morrigan in control of a golem. That's kinda scary."

"Father told me that King Maric had a golem fighting for him," Rori explains, frowning at the control rod. It's not as long as the staffs the mages use for their spells. I guess, it's about twelve inches long, smooth with a knobbly ending, almost like an acorn.

"Don't you think it looks a lot like..." Rori begins, but her voice trails off.

"Asparagus?" I offer.

"Errr... yes..." Rori blushes. "Well, there was a mage with a golem. He said the thing was huge and proved rather useful in battle although the mage was an idiot and made much of a show of how high and mighty he was. And didn't you say you had a golem as a child?"

"A miniature golem doll. That's something completely different."
"Well, boys have toys and men have the real stuff." She wants to hand me the control rod but I hold up my hands in defense and back away.

"No way I'm touching this! I have seen where Zevran stuck it."

"Just be glad he only stuck it in his mouth," Rori mumbles and shudders.

"Where else would he possible have...?"

"You don't want to know!" she squeaks.

"Probably not."

As the village where the golem is located is on our route to Haven, Rori decides we could go there before we search for Genitivi. In case the search will turn out to be dangerous. "Very likely considering our luck," Rori remarks.

The village is packed with darkspawn so we clear it. That's what Grey Wardens are there for after all. Only dead darkspawn is good darkspawn.

The golem stands in the middle of the village square on a patch of grass like a statue. It doesn't look that scary the way it stands there. Just a bit covered in bird poo. And someone has scribbled 'Olaf is an idiot' across one of the golem buttocks. With the flowers and the bench to sit on this looks like a rather cozy place - if not for all the dead villagers and darkspawn.

Rori holds up the control rod and says the words she has been told. Nothing happens. She tries again. Still nothing.

"Maybe it's broken?" Leliana suggests.

Rori slowly turns and glares daggers at Zevran. "What? I didn't break it! Only because I used it as demonstration material doesn't mean I broke it!" The elf sulks.

"Are you sure you remember the words correctly?"

"I had Alistair note them." Rori fishes the note out of one of the satchels at her belt.

"Let me see... What is that?" Wynne squints her eyes. "Did you invent your own secret cypher, Alistair, or is this just the worst handwriting I've ever seen?"

"Didn't you say you love riddles, Wynne?" I smile pleasantly at her. "Well, here you got one! This could be an 'a'. Or maybe it's a 'u'."

Ten minutes later it's quite clear that either the rod is not working or the words given to Rori aren't correct.

"Okay, so as it stands here maybe the mage who controlled it before has left something useful behind. A note with the correct words would be a start, right?" Rori doesn't give up easily. She never does. Considering she has to find a way to end the Blight and slay the archdemon that's very comforting.

"Only if his handwriting wasn't as messy as Alistair's," Wynne sighs.

We find some villagers hiding in the cellar of the mage's house. And of course we rescue them. And the little girl that got herself trapped by the cat possessed by a demon. I might not like the idea of activating that murderous golem that killed its master but helping the villagers and the girl was
certainly worth coming here. And Wynne and Leliana get another riddle to solve. And we receive the right words to activate the golem.

What a day!

So back at the village square, Rori tries again and this time, the creature moves. I wonder if it is uncomfortable for someone made of stone to stand in one position for such a long time. I'd have a rather stiff neck for sure. Do golems feel anything at all? Pain? Fatigue? What do they do when nobody orders them around? Do they get bored?

Obviously they do get bored.

"Oh, you poor dear! That must have been... really, really booring." Leliana says once the statue has told its story.

"And the villagers had no idea they were being watched? Creepy." I shudder.

"I don't know..." Rori says. "Being paralyzed without anybody knowing I am still there, being trapped in my own body, condemned to be the witness of the lives of others... that sounds far worse to me. The... go!... it... he? she?" She turns back to the creature that stretches and flexes its stone muscles or whatever golems have. Maybe it is a bit stiff after all. "Do you have a name?"

"Perhaps. I may have forgotten after all the years of being called golem. 'Golem, fetch me that chair.' 'Do be a good golem and squash that insipid bandit.' And let's not forget: 'Golem, pick me up, I'm tired of walking.'"

Being a golem doesn't sound like much fun. Listening to it, I almost feel a bit sorry. Rori does feel sorry. I can tell by the look on her face. She has that habit of trying to understand someone. And often she does. She now squirms uncomfortably and I am quite sure she's all imagining how it has to be being ordered around all the time and used like a tool when - obviously - the creature has a mind of its own.

And there I always thought golems were soulless. Walking statues and nothing more. Boy, was I wrong!

"It does have the control rod, doesn't it? I am awake so it must..."

"Err... it? You're talking about me? I have a name, you know. And I quite well remember it. And I'm female - that has confused others before, but really, I am." Ignoring Rori, the golem seems lost in its thoughts. "Uhm, is something wrong?"

"I feel the control rod yet I feel... Go on, order me to do something!"

"Order you to do something? But why? Oh, okay, if it makes you happy... uhm... give Zevran a hug."

The elf stumbles backwards until he can safely hide behind Sten. "Now, now. I don't care much for foreign objects invading my personal space. Well... usually."

"I got quite the contrary impression when you talked to me earlier about... certain things," Rori replies sweetly.

"Haha! Paying me back now, aren't you?"

"Nothing. I feel nothing." The golem seems rather delighted - and so does Zevran. I wouldn't want to
be hugged by a golem so I don’t blame him.

But that means... Oh blast! The rod still isn’t working correctly and Rori has no control over the golem. Great. Just great!

That’s the point where I’d just turn and run - or make sure first a golem with free will doesn’t do something horrible. But Rori has a way to collect freaks.

"Are you certain you want to bring that... thing with us? It could be dangerous. And large."

"Think of it as a portable battle ram," Rori says cheerfully. I am not convinced but she kisses me and how could I argue with her afterwards?

"Good point. Better it than me anyhow."

And that’s how we welcome a bird hating golem called Shale into our group.

"What are you going to do with the rod now?" I ask on leaving the village, Shale trudging behind.

"Oh, I don’t know. Maybe give it to Zevran. He pointed out a few ways of using it that got absolutely nothing to do with controlling a golem."

Before I can make up my mind if asking her what kind of use she is talking about, a squashing sound from behind makes us spin round.

Shale is standing there, a puddle of blood forming around one of its feet, white feathers sticking out of the mass. The golem just shrugs.

"Maybe," I croak. "Maybe you should keep that rod and see if you can get it repaired. Just in case."
Delaying Tactics

To reach Haven, we follow a mountain path so steep and narrow, we have to leave the horses in the valley. It also takes us ages to find that passage. Rori is close to tearing that map Genitivi drew to tiny little pieces and stomp on it. Obviously she's not the only one who's rather frustrated because on nearing the village, Sten suddenly challenges her. "Interesting strategy. Tell me, you intend to keep going north until it becomes south and attack the archdemon from the rear?"

"It'll never see this coming," Rori replies cheerfully. The Qunari is his usual grumpy self. That's really nothing to worry about, right?

"Truly. It would surprise me if my enemy counterattacked by running away and climbing a mountain," Sten growls.

Rori stops in her tracks, turning slowly to face the warrior. She has to tilt her head to look him in the eyes. He towers over her menacingly. Out of the corner of my eyes I notice Zevran moving silently to stand behind Sten. The elf's stance gives away he expects trouble. From Sten? He wouldn't possibly hurt Rori, would he? Well, he did murder a whole family including children because of a sword. And he keeps complaining about Rori's leadership... Blast!

"We're not running away from anything," Rori says firmly, never breaking eye contact with Sten. She's going to have a very stiff neck if this argument lasts much longer. Her lighthearted cheerfulness is gone. This is earnest. I move to the other side when Zevran motions me to do so. Leliana frowns, watching us. Then she quietly nocks an arrow. Wynne retreats a few steps to get away from the Qunari. Morrigan just rolls her eyes. The golem - well, I am not really good at judging people. It's even worse with statues.

"The archdemon is our goal and we are heading away from it to find the charred remains of a dead woman," Sten barks, shifting his weight. Zevran's hands twitch. He's ready to grab his weapons if necessary. I stay as still as I can, not daring to draw Sten's attention in case we're facing a fight. "I will not follow in your shadow as you run from battle." One step closer and the Qunari glowers at her. Rori does not back away. She looks as if she is tempted to kick Sten's most private parts.

"I am not running from battle, Sten," Rori groans in exasperation. Her hackles are raised. I can easily tell by the way she hisses at the Qunari, her fists clenched at her sides. "I am gathering allies to build an army that can slay the archdemon and the hordes of darkspawn that will follow it. If that means that I have to climb mountains, then I will. If it means I have to go underground, then I will. Whatever is necessary to end the Blight, I will do it."

Sten doesn't seem convinced. His jaws are firmly set and his expression is merciless. Rori just looks furious. Bloody blasted furious. I wouldn't challenge her. But Qunari obviously are suicidal. Barkley has joined her, whining in confusion as he looks from Rori to Sten. The dog and the Qunari get along quite well. But in the end he's Rori's faithful warhound and growls at Sten. You cannot feed your way into a mabari's heart with cookies once he has chosen his mistress.

"And I know one thing for sure: we will never be able to defeat the darkspawn alone," Rori goes on. "Maybe in your opinion this is weak or stupid. I call it realistic. The ashes of Andraste can help us heal Arl Eamon - and Eamon will help us defeat Loghain. He has the influence and power to do so. Because - just in case you did not notice - Loghain wants us dead. He has started a civil war after murdering his king and all the other Grey Wardens. The last thing Ferelden needs during a Blight is a civil war. We need to unite and fight together because only together there can be victory for us. And that's the reason why we are here. We are not running from battle. We are preparing for the final
battle that will be the downfall of the archdemon."

I think she makes sense. Really, I do. Sten, I don't know. I have trouble understanding the philosophy of the Qunari. Running straight after the archdemon in my opinion is stupid and suicidal. Sten seems to think differently - or we're just lost in translation. I just hope he won't do anything stupid because I swear he will not live to regret it if he as much as lays a finger on Rori. She is my woman. And I feel very protective over her.

Sten considers this for a moment. Then he slowly nods. I let out a breath I haven't noticed I was holding. Zevran relaxes at the same time and Leliana's arrow disappears as if she had never nocked it. Sten is completely oblivious to what happens around him. Or he doesn't let us know he knows we were ready to defend Rori just in case. Zevran for sure has earnt some big bonus points with me. But now I have to watch Sten. Blast!

We move on but there's an awkwardness to the silence that follows the argument. "Seriously!?" Rori huffs, keeping her voice low. She angrily kicks every stone small enough for kicking. "I don't get why they all think they can do it better. Or why everybody thinks they should lecture me about duty. Or about how a Grey Warden is supposed to act and what I am supposed to do." She is bristling with rage. "There's not enough pressure yet, please gimme more!" She forcefully kicks yet another stone.

I soothingly put an arm around her shoulders. "You're doing great, Rori. You've already done so much."

"Not enough it seems. Correct me if I'm wrong but didn't the last few Blights last for several years? But I am expected to end this one within a few months? Everybody keeps dropping shit on me. It's too much! It's suffocating!"

Oh boy, and here's the moment for me to feel awfully guilty. Blast, I'm so sorry. I should try and support her more since it was me to load the leadership on her so I could take the easy way out.

"I'm sorry."

"Nah, Alistair, you don't have to be sorry. You are the best support I can wish for." She rubs her face tiredly. "I'm frustrated, that's all. Don't listen to me."

Oh yes, she is frustrated. And I can understand why. It's not as if anybody has given her much credit for what she has achieved. I feel myself growing real furious when I watch her biting back tears of anger and frustration. "Excuse me, please," I mumble. And then - before I can think about what I am doing and before I can stop myself, I find myself face to face with Sten. Well, face to chest. He's so large even I have to tilt my head. That certainly doesn't make for the most intimidating impression.

"What was this about?" I snap. "Without Rori you'd still be sitting in that cage in Lothering."

"That was not the point."

"No?" I snarl. I feel tempted to shove him. I don't of course. I might be an idiot but I am not a suicidal idiot. "Well, the point is, she's doing a damn good job when everybody else just dropped everything at her feet. And you accuse her of running away? She is the bravest woman I have ever met and the last to back out of a fight like a coward. She has fought the darkspawn wherever she could and she will fight until the bitter end. You don't know nothing about what it is like to be a Grey Warden, yet you behave as if you know it all. Well, you don't."

That said I turn on my heel and march back to walk with Rori. I don't wait for his reply. I don't want to hear it. I want to be left alone with Rori. Now I am bristling with anger, too. Sten can kiss my
royal butt. And, boy, am I glad I stole his cookies! Serves him damn right! I slip out of one of my gauntlets and take Rori's hand in mine. I need that contact now, I need to feel her. She looks up at me and smiles.
Asylum

Chapter Notes

In this chapter Alistair mentions his birthday to be in Haring (December). It is only confirmed that he was born 9:10 Dragon, but since Maric met his mother Fiona also in 9:10 Dragon and the novel The Calling makes it obvious that they met in winter, Alistair must have been born sometime Harvestmere (October), Firstfall (November) or Haring (December) 9:10 Dragon.

You can find a calendar of Thedas here: http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Calendar

Maybe it's the thin air up here in the mountains. Maybe it's the cold. Maybe it's we're all still feeling awkward after Rori's confrontation with Sten. I don't know. But Haven is strange from the beginning. Real strange. And I already think so before we find the table with the human blood. Something is rotten here.

On leaving the house, the villagers attack us. Before there have been none on the streets. All we've seen was faces behind the windows, faces that would disappear when they saw us looking their direction. Rori holds up her hands in defense when the first peasants come storming at her. They are armed with clubs or with their bare hands. Sure, they outnumber us, but fighting them will turn into a massacre. I get why she's hesitant - but I can't wait for her being run through with a dungfork, so it is me to start the actual battle, cutting down the sturdy villager wielding said dungfork. She still tries to talk with them while defending herself. But at some point we have to give up. They won't listen. They are fierce and fanatic in their attacks, the men, the women, old and young. Even the kids old enough to fight. Rori dodges the attacks of a boy - he can't be older than twelve years - until she is cornered and it's either her or him. She tries to knock him out instead of killing him but his attacks with his chopper are so frenzied, she cannot get the right aim. When there's another villager lunging himself at her, she has no choice anymore.

I defend myself against a granny and her son. It feels awful. It feels wrong, despite the blood we found on the altar. Human blood. It is Morrigan to save me. Her spell turns the granny into a human torch and sends her running, screaming so terribly that it chills me to the bone. They other villagers don't even try to help her but keep attacking until all of them lie dead.

Rori is visibly shaken. "Fuck," she breathes. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Agreed.

I stare down at the young girl that clawed with her bare hands at me. She was hardly older than fourteen. Now she is dead. This was one part of why I never liked to become a templar. The part where you bring young mages to the circle. Frightened, terrified children that get shoved around and too often maltreated simply for what they are. Some templars just overreact. Or their hatred is too strong that they cannot see the difference between a frightened child and an evil bloodmage. They kept saying I am too soft, that I don't see the danger that lies within these children. I mean, I do get they have to be educated. Look at Connor! I never objected to taking them to the tower. But... one doesn't have to treat them like criminals, right? You don't have that kind of trouble when fighting darkspawn. It makes life much easier.
"Oh, pull yourselves together, all of you whining softies," Morrigan snorts when she has had enough of Leliana bawling and Wynne comforting her. And of Rori looking like she's going to vomit at the sight of what is left of the villager Shale sat upon. And of me, shaken and having turned a whiter shade of pale. "They were foolish enough to attack us. They got what they deserved."

"What now?" I ask Rori. She shudders, then the shocked expression is replaced by one of grim determination. I can tell she's had about enough for today. But we both know it's not yet over.

"We find the ashes, heal the Arl and kill that fucking archdemon."

"Language!" Wynne calls from behind.

"And fucking kill that bloody fucking archdemon!" Rori shouts at the top of her voice.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better," Wynne sighs.

We first find a dead knight from Redcliffe. Then we find Brother Genitivi. Last but not least we do find out what's wrong with the villagers. This is not just a cozy village with a very low tolerance treshold for strangers, but a cult of weirdos who believe Andraste came back as a high dragon.

They hatch dragon eggs and stuff. They feed the dragons.

As a child I so wanted to have a dragon as a pet. I pestered Arl Eamon for three years in a row to give me a dragon for birthday. My birthday is only in Haring but I already began nagging him in Solace. But all I ever got was a plush dragon. I was terribly disappointed back then.

We slay more villagers - or cultists. And dragon babies. I still think they are cute. Until I meet their teenage brothers and sisters. Now I think Arl Eamon may have had a point when he ignored my wish to have my own dragon.

"Maker's Breath, what do they want with all these dragons?" Rori exclaims when we find even more eggs. "I mean, some time they all will be grown up. Can such a small village have enough cattle to feed them... or..."

"Or do they just send them out to find their own fodder," I complete her sentence. "This is bad. Real bad."

And it gets worse. It always does. We meet Kolgrim, the high priest of this dragon cult.

"The prophet Andraste has overcome death itself and has returned to Her faithful in a form more radiant than you can imagine!" he thunders when Rori isn't convinced of his great deed. "Not even the Tevinter Imperium could hope to slay Her now. What hope do you have?"

Rori and I exchange a look. She taps her forehead with her index finger. Yep, that Kolgrim guy is a complete nutcase.

"You know, I think we'll give it a try," Rori replies sweetly. "This wouldn't be the first dragon we slay... although the last one was the shapeshifted Witch of the Wilds. So she wasn't a real dragon, I guess. But she looked like one. And breathed fire. And she was huge. So... nope, we're not going to do some wicked blood magic shit with the ashes of Andraste."

"Language!" Wynne sighs at the same time as she knocks one of the cultists over the head with her staff.

We kill the cultists - and then on emerging from the caves, find us facing a high dragon. It's both
terrifying and glorious in it's mighty beauty. Maker, I do hope it already had breakfast.

"We're not planning on... actually fighting it are we? Couldn't we just... sneak around it?" Zevran shifts his weight uneasily.

"Oh, I'm not afraid," Wynne chuckles. "It wouldn't eat me anyhow. Tough and stringy. You, on the other hand... ought to be worried."

"Nah, too much metal." I knock my knuckles against my breastplate. "It will have tummy ache for weeks...But seriously...A High Dragon is not a joke. We'd best be careful... real careful."

Rori watches the mighty beast for a while. "We kill it. Prepare for battle."

"Err... what?"

"The archdemon is a dragon. This is good practice, right?"

I grab her by her shoulders and turn her around to face me. "Rori, if this is about Sten, you don't have to prove anything to him."

"We have destroyed the cult. Where will it find fodder now?"

"Ahhh... alright."

We almost become dragon fodder ourselves - Andraste II likes her meat medium - and I swear, it's mere luck we survive. Mental note to myself: Serious talk with Rori about unnecessary risks.

"These ashes, they have incredible healing power, right?" Zevran groans next to me. "Can we get some for ourselves?" He closes his eyes and is so silent that I am afraid he has died on me. But then his eyes snap open again and he goes: "Dragons have treasures, right? Would you mind if I didn't come with you to search for the remains of dear Andraste?" With great effort, he sits up and starts looking around for caves high above us. "Ahhh," he grins when he spots a hole in the mountain side. "Do we have a rope? Do you need it? No? Can I have it?"

I don't really feel well. Getting breathed at by a fire-spitting dragon when wearing a suit of plate armour is like getting roasted in your own personal oven. When Rori helps me shed the armour I look like a lobster. Considering that these poor animals are dropped into boiling water alive, I have a lot of sympathy for them. I will never ever again be able to eat lobster without thinking of the high dragon in the Frostback Mountains.

Wynne tries to mend us all back together and more or less she succeeds. My skin will peel anyway and it's quite uncomfortable to wear an armour. It feels like I got myself sunburnt after the healing - which is much better than before. It still hurts. But at least I get Rori rubbing me with a cooling salve from head to toe. And she really doesn't miss a single inch of my body. She runs her hands down my body, visibly enjoying the touch. Considering that these poor animals are dropped into boiling water alive, I have a lot of sympathy for them. I will never ever again be able to eat lobster without thinking of the high dragon in the Frostback Mountains.

Wynne tries to mend us all back together and more or less she succeeds. My skin will peel anyway and it's quite uncomfortable to wear an armour. It feels like I got myself sunburnt after the healing - which is much better than before. It still hurts. But at least I get Rori rubbing me with a cooling salve from head to toe. And she really doesn't miss a single inch of my body. She runs her hands down my body, visibly enjoying the touch. Her caress is so gentle, it doesn't hurt at all. I smile at the dreamy look on her face and the warmth in her eyes when she looks at me. She starts with my face, slides her hands down my neck and over my shoulders. The mountain brezze is chilly but eases the heat of my burnt skin. The ointment also numbs the stinging. And the touch of Rori's hands is like a balm of its own. She roams my pecs and abs, takes care of my back and arms. She rubs my legs, even my feet, back up to my buttocks and then... I gasp in surprise. My body reacts instantly to her touch. I want to protest first... but... what can I say? It feels so damn good. And I have earnt myself a little reward, right?

"Maybe I should get myself roasted by a dragon more often," I groan when she slides her hands up and down my length.
"You like that you only got to say so," Rori laughs, blushing at her own boldness. I can't say anything at all at the moment. I am all naked and standing in the middle of some ancient temple ruins on the top of a mountain and not too far away from a dead dragon and our recovering companions while a beautiful ginger jerks me off. Not to mention the ashes of Andraste are somewhere close. If lightning doesn't strike me now it never will.

This has to be a dream. Someone please pinch me.

On a second thought my dreams usually are full of darkspawn. So maybe it is real after all.

Oh, Maker's Breath!

"Feeling better?" Rori grins up at me, She's so proud of herself it makes me laugh.

"Much better." I consider this for a moment. "Although now I so want to make love to you...." Rori is already pulling the laces of her blouse open. Moments later we're kissing feverishly, while I squeeze and caress her breasts. She tries to kick her boots off to get out of her pants, then obviously decides this takes too much time. Cursing, she turns around, presenting her backside to me as she bends over a rock.

I stare down at her firm little buttocks and that sweet pink slit between her legs. She can't really... she doesn't want me...? Andraste's flaming sword! We're no dogs or something like that... Oh, it's so tempting... "Alistair!" Rori gasps, wiggling her beautiful little ass. She looks at me over her shoulder, her eyes dark with desire.

Hestitantly I rub my fingers at her folds. Oh, she's so wet. She whimpers softly at my touch and squirms. "Hurry," she breathes. Blast it! Who cares about what the Chantry says? I place my hands at her hips and carefully push into her. She bucks against me and I groan. Oh boy!

And then we mate like dogs would do. It's so intense I'm glad she gave me a release before or I wouldn't last long. This is not like the tender lovenaking we experienced before. It's rougher, faster, more forceful. I'm afraid I could hurt her. I'm so deep inside her, I thrust so hard into her. It has to be painful! But every time I try to go easy on her, she snarls and bucks against me. In the end I lose myself in the rhythm, that matches the thunder of our heartbeats.

"Alistair? Rori?" We hear Wynne call. "How long can it possibly take to rub some ointment on some burnt skin? What are you doing over there? What in the name in of the Maker are they doing?"

"You sent two love-crazed teenagers off to rub something oily on naked skin - what do you think they are doing?" Zevran laughs.

"But they are hurt! They... oh, in the name of the Maker! Rori! Alistair! If you tear any wounds open again or make anything worse, don't you come running to me!"

Awkward. I'd feel awfully embarrassed if the tension inside of me wasn't at a critical point that very moment. All I can do is grunt and pound into Rori. She clings to the rock for support, her mewing moans and whimpers turn into a cry of pleasure when her body is shaken by a powerful orgasm. I follow her lead, pouring my seed into her.

"Someone really should explain to them about mountains and echoes," Wynne comments in the silence that follows.

Ahhh... haha... echoes. Blast!

I rest my cheek at Rori's back, trying to steady my ragged breathing. She is equally spent. I pull out
of her to turn her around and wrap her in my arms. She's all flushed and her eyes shine brightly. "I
love you," she whispers.

"I love you, too." I kiss her gently. "Guess we should get dressed and find the ashes before Sten
challenges you again for not battling the archdemon."

"My mother always said love is a battlefield."

"If what we just did is the kind of battles fought there I will never ask for a peace treaty. But I doubt
Sten will find this convincing," I laugh. I help her lace her blouse and she helps me with my armour.
"Prepared for more awkward moments and knowing smirks from our dear companions?"

"Never, but I guess I will survive anyway."

When we feel ready to enter the temple where Andraste's ashes are said to be, Zevran already is half
up the mountain side, clinging to it like a four-legged spider. Sten can't move. Or Wynne won't let
him. Morrigan is left back to take care of him while Shale stands guard.

The rest of us prepares to leave, meaning Wynne, Leliana, Rori and I. Leliana can hardly walk but
she says if we leave her back here she will hate us forever.

"So are you going to continue staring at me as if I am covered in eels?" I hear Morrigan say when
she kneels down next to Sten, taking care of his bandages.

"Eels would be something."

And there I thought Sten had no sense of humour. I almost choke on the water I've been drinking.

Morrigan giggles. "Prudery! How charming. I expected paranoia. This is much better. I prefer to be
stared at lustfully, if at all."

"And there she says I have a strange taste in men," Rori whispers to me, kissing my cheek.

"Keep trying, then." Sten stares sternly at something far away. He's so not interested. I can't blame
him. Morrigan... she is beautiful, I guess. But there's something about her that makes me recoil. She
could be the most beautiful woman in all Thedas and I still wouldn't feel attracted by her.

"Oh? Then shall I demonstrate an act or two? And you may tell me hot or cold?" She gets up in one
graceful move and stretches in a way that reveals far more than anybody of us ever wanted to see.
Then getting back down on her knees, she leans so close to Sten she almost presses her breasts at his
face.

"I'll save time. Cold." Sten's even colder. He's icy.

"You are a tease," Morrigan chuckles.

"I almost feel sorry for him," I say when Rori leads us to the entrance of the temple.

"I don't. He can handle himself. And after his stupid challenge earlier I am still annoyed with him.
And it's quite entertaining. For us. Not for him."

"Vengeful little brat," I chuckle.
"Do you feel that? This place is practically infused with magic." Wynne breathes when we enter the old ruins.

"We... we must be close. This is holy ground. I can feel it." Leliana exclaims excitedly. "Do you feel it? Oh, this is amazing! I have never before felt so close to the Maker. This is such a grand, such a magnificent moment!"

"It is, isn't it?" Wynne sighs.

"I don't feel anything, do you?" Rori whispers to me.

"Nothing. But I guess, after what we just did we probably can be happy we didn't get struck by lightning on entering," I reply in a low voice. This place is made for whispering. It's impressive for sure, and imagining we are close to the remains of Andraste - it makes me shiver in awe.

"You know, I don't believe in this lightning theory," Rori ponders. "I bet we could do it right in front of Andraste's urn and nothing would happen. We could probably wallow in the ashes while doing it and - still nothing would happen."

"Blasphemy! Shame on you, Rori Cousland! You're such a naughty girl. Can't you think of anything else anymore?"

"No. Can you?"

That's such a typical Rori-remark, it makes me laugh out loud. Leliana spins round to pierce me with an icy glare. "What? Is it not allowed to laugh in the presence of Andraste?" More like in the presence of what is left of her.

"Show some respect, both of you!"

I try to be respectful and force my mind to think about something less deviant. Like the Chant of Light. I know it by heart. I begin to recite it to myself silently when Rori whispers next to me: "I so loved what you did with me out there. It was so... intense. We really should do that again... soon."

POOF! go all my respectful thoughts. Now I can't remember a single line of the Chant of Light anymore. Instead I have these pictures in my head of Rori bent over that rock.

"You do that on purpose, you beast!"

She blushes when she casts an upside glance at me apologetically, biting her lips ever so sweetly. "Sorry," she gasps. A desire demon could learn from her. She's so not sorry at all.

"Temptress."

"Guilty as charged," she admits. "I can't help it. You just have that effect on me."

"You'll need to be disciplined, young lady."

"Oh? Are you going to spank me?" she teases.

"What? No! Of course not!" Why is this thought so incredibly arousing? I try to fight the images in my mind but I can't. Oh blast! If I can't control myself I'll walk into the temple that probably holds
the holy ashes of Andraste with a hard-on. "Stop it!" I growl at Rori. "Or I might really spank you. You deserve it for sure."

Wynne clears her throat to gain our attention. I haven't noticed at all that Rori and I have been trudging behind. I only had eyes for Rori and she only for me. "One day both of you are going to stumble over a cliff because you don't look where you're going. Now, I think this gentleman over there wants to talk to us." She nods at an apparition, standing in front of the gates that lead deeper into the temple.

"I bid you welcome, pilgrim." The apparition greets us.

"Pilgrim? Oh... err... yeah." Now Rori blushes for real. Seems she at least has the decency to feel a little bit ashamed.

"I am the Guardian, the protector of the urn of sacred ashes. I have waited years for this."

"Really? For me?"

"You are the first to arrive in a very long time. It has been my duty, my life to protect the Urn and prepare the way for the faithful who come to revere Andraste."

"Err..." Rori is so obviously uncomfortable now, I should feel sorry for her. Well, I don't. It serves her right. She looks so compunctious ... okay, I do feel sorry for her. "Can I see the urn?"

"You have come to honour Andraste and you shall if you prove yourself worthy."

"Oh... now I wish I had paid better attention during religious instruction - at least the times when I didn't skip it all together," Rori mumbles, shifting her weight uncomfortably.

"It is not my place to decide your worthiness. The Gauntlet does that."

"Worthy to see the sacred urn," Rori whispers. She looks as if she's about to become sick. "One moment, please." She grabs my arm and drags me away from the patiently waiting guardian.

"Alistair," Rori whines once we're out of earshot. She clings to my arm. "I cannot do that. How can I be worthy? I am not a religious person. I've... I've had terrible thoughts when coming in here... I've only just... outside... I will never pass that test!"

"Rori..."

"I've been a terrible daughter. I've caused my parents so much trouble. I've abandoned them, left them back to die alone..."

"Rori..."

"And now I am running around aimlessly trying to stop the Blight, although I know, that's too big for me... I just stumble around... so many rely on me... Sometimes I think it's mere luck... like when saving Connor... It all could have gone so wrong! Arl Eamon will die if I fail... So many have died because of me already..." If I don't calm her down she's going to hyperventilate.

"Rori, breathe!"

"I cannot do this, Alistair!"

"So, you're going to run away? That's not the Rori I know. The Rori I know would say 'Bloody blast it!' and give it a try."
"This is the sacred urn, for real! How can I be worthy?"

"That's probably one of the many things that make you worthy, that you think you aren't."

"That's not really convincing."

"Well, you can either try or walk out of here and tell Sten we climbed that mountain for nothing."

"You're supposed to support me!" she says sullenly, and hugs herself. "In moments like that I so miss my father. He'd say 'Pup, don't worry about this.' and then he'd make it right."

I take her hands in mine. "Hey, look at me." When she doesn't I gently lift her chin to make her face me. "He's not here, love. But I am."

She leans against me and I hold her close. It's alright. We all have doubts. We all falter. I still feel guilty for having not died with Duncan and the other Grey Wardens. Rori... she makes me happy. Happier than I ever thought I could be. And the happier I get the more I believe I don't deserve it. Why me? Why am I allowed to live when all the others are dead? And then I think about what lies ahead and about what Rori told me - that I have to look after myself more. Always it's Rori that pulls me away from the gloom. And that moment of ultimative guilt and regret sinks back into the shadows of my soul.

Rori inhales deeply, then she straightens. "Oh bloody blast it! Let's go and get this done."

"That's my girl."

So we return to the Guardian and answer his questions. It's as if he's been eavesdropping. Or read our minds. Or looked into our souls. Creepy. But at least we are allowed to enter the Gauntlet - and we don't get hit by lightning. We receive a last warning not to remove the urn from the temple or more of the ashes than we are allowed to take for Arl Eamon's healing. The guardian sounds dead serious about that, so I think we better listen to him. Apart from that actually everything's just fine - although Rori really could have paid more attention during religious instructions. Luckily Leliana, Wynne and I can solve the riddles for her.

And then her world comes crashing down on her again. We walk through the door into the next room and Rori stops dead at the sight of the man standing there with his back turned to us. For a moment I'm afraid she's going to faint. A heartbreaking sob escapes her and I quickly grab her arm to support her.

The man turns and his lips curl into a sad smile at the sight of Rori. "My dearest child..."

"Father...," she whispers. "Oh, Papa... I am so sorry."

Oh blast! I tighten my hold on her. Tears are streaming down her face and she's shaking. I wish I could ease her sorrow, I wish I could make things right for her like her father used to. But I can't.

"You know that I am gone and all your prayers and wishes will not bring me back," Bryce Cousland says softly. "Pup... I know you miss me, but my death and my life, no longer have a hold on you. This is how it should be. Set your eyes on the horizon, do not look back, and do not falter. You have such a long road ahead of you, and you must be prepared. Farewell, pup, this is our last goodbye."

"Papa!" Rori cries when the apparition vanishes in front of our eyes. Her legs finally won't carry her anymore and I catch her, sinking to the ground with her to cradle her in my arms. I whisper soothingly to her and stroke her hair, as she lies in my arms and cries out her grief with tears hot and wild.
Her eyes are puffed and rimmed red when she shrugs out of my embrace. She snuffles - and wipes her nose at her sleeve. Does this girl never have a handkerchief? I give her mine - again. "You can keep this one as well," I smile. "It can keep the ones you already have company."

Rori sadly smiles back at me. "What would I do without you, Alistair?" she whispers hoarsely. "Wipe your nose at your sleeve and run around all covered in snot. You'd be for sure the sweetest snotty-nosed brat ever."

Now she's grinning. It looks a bit crooked and forced, still... mission completed.

Wynne and Leliana stay in the background. Only when I help Rori back to her feet, they come forward to gently pat her shoulder. It's a gesture of comfort Rori answers with a small smile of thanks.

"Ready to move on?" I ask gently when she pockets the handkerchief.

"Well, we can't sit here forever, can we?"

It takes us ages to solve the riddle. Well, it's actually Leliana solving it. She claps her hands together and giddily orders Rori, Wynne and me around, moving us as if we were pawns in a game.

And then, finally, finally, we are there. The Urn of the Sacred Ashes of Andraste is right there in front of us - behind a wall of fire.

"By the Maker, it's... it's the Urn of Sacred Ashes! That's it! That's really it!" I exclaim. It feels... I feel... no, I cannot describe it. Rori next to me seems speechless.

"I... I... I don't know what to say..." Leliana breathes. She lays her hands over her heart in awe.

"I... I thought it was a legend. I didn't believe..." Wynne whispers.

"How do we get there?" Rori finally asks after everybody else has expressed their veneration. I grin. Always the practical type.

The trick is... we have to undress.

"What!?" I squeak. "Everything? We certainly can leave on our underwear, right?"

We can't.

Blast!

I am the only man here with three women - and one of them could be my granny! Alright, I wouldn't like it any better if it was Zevran and Sten here with me and Rori - because then they would get to see my woman naked.

"Alistair, we have all heard you," Leliana points out. "This cannot possibly be any more embarrassing."

"You may have heard something, but you didn't see!" Cursing under my breath I slip out of my underwear and cover myself immediately as good as possible with my hands. And I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Nice," Leliana comments and I just know she's staring at me.
"Very nice," Wynne agrees.

This is not funny! "Andraste has a strange sense of humour," I grumble. I hear the soft padding of Rori's feet on the stone floor. Then I feel her near me. She tiptoes to kiss me softly.

I groan. "Merciful Andraste! Rori! I know you are naked. Please don't make this extra hard for me!"

"Extra hard," Leliana giggles.

Haha!

Oh, that wicked bard!

Rori carefully tests if we can cross through the flames now - we can. They seem to have disappeared. I see nothing of it because I keep my eyes shut. Well, one time I dare a glimpse. I mean, Rori is all naked here. I just can't stop myself. I think she's over there so I turn and open my eyes and see... Wynne!

Doom!

I will never be able to sleep well again.

This is so awkward!

Boy, am I thankful when I can put on my clothes again!

"He has such a nice ass," Leliana whispers to Rori. "And these abs and pecs. No wonder you can't take your hands of him."

Hello? We're here with the ashes of Andraste! Show some respect!

When we are finally all covered again, we slowly approach the urn. "I didn't think anyone could succeed in finding Andraste's final resting place... but here... here She is," I gasp. "Seems you are worthy after all." I nudge Rori.

"The Maker only knows why," she murmurs. "I just cannot believe we made it." She lifts the lid off the urn ever so carefully and peeks into it. "Anybody has a little box? Or... a handkerchief..." She reaches into her pocket.

"Whoa! Rori! Take a clean one!" I give her another of mine. Boy, am I glad the Revered Mother insisted her templars always have enough handkerchiefs with them.
The Birds and the Bees

On leaving the temple, we find Zevran sitting on a heap of golden coins and gems and jewlery. A crown too big for him sits lopsidedly on his head. I am surprised he doesn't topple over with all the golden chains wrapped around his neck. He hardly can move his fingers anymore because of all the rings stuck on them. Beside him Morrigan gets excited about a specially shiny necklace with glittering rubies. Her head is crowned by a matching golden diadem. Shale cradles an incredibly huge sapphire as if it was a baby. The only ones absolutely unaffected by the riches are Sten and Barkley.

"How will this help to slay the archdemon?" is the first question Sten asks when he spots Rori. "Did you find what we had to climb this mountain for?" is the second.

"Well, you know what mercenaries are, right? They usually want to get paid for their work. So having a coin or two is not that bad a thing. And yes, we got the ashes and can head back to Redcliffe."

Sten snorts. "Congratulations. You've found your pot of holy dirt."

"Where's the urn? Didn't you bring it?" Zevran comes staggering towards us for Rori to show him the handkerchief. "I only see snot," the elf comments.

"Ah... haaa... wrong one." Grinning sheepishly, she shows him the second handkerchief. I consider making her hand it to Leliana or Wynne to keep it save. Rori is likely to accidentally wipe her nose on Andraste.

"Dirt?" Zevran frowns.

"Well, that's what ashes are."

"And that's all you got? There has to be more. You do realize it's worth a fortune, don't you?"

"Merciful Andraste, Zevran! How many fortunes do you need? You got a dragon's treasure," Rori exclaims. "And how do you intend to transport all this?"

"Everybody carries as much as possible?"

And that's exactly what we do. We stuff our pockets with coins - Zevran even fills his Antivan leather boots with so many that he can hardly walk anymore. He stuffs gems into his pants and a set of goblets with many rubies and emeralds into his backpack. Morrigan has given up on trying to look pretty. If she can carry five tiaras on her head that's exactly what she will do. We even load Barkley with bags filled with more coins than I have ever seen in one place. Now it somewhat seems mean of me to not have offered Goldanna the money she wanted. But I couldn't know then we would slay a high dragon and steal its treasure.

We rattle and clonk down the mountain, cross through the village that now ressembles a graveyard. I try not to look at those we have slain. The way Rori casts her eyes down she probably feels equally awful.

We're lucky our horses are still where we left them. As everybody is exhausted, we set up camp right there. Rori doesn't even bother with her tent but comes straight to mine. I so don't object. She's silent, lost in thought and memories. Sadness casts a shadow on her face and her eyes are dark with grief.
I've never had anybody to really care for me. I do not know what it feels like to have parents who love you unconditionally. There was nobody to soothe me at night when the nightmares came, nobody to comfort me when I cried. Arl Eamon, he was there, yes, but as much as he seemed to care at times, he was always distant. There were the maids that cared for me, made sure I was fed and clothed. They were nice to me, some even motherly. But none of them was my mother. They came and left, I've seen so many faces throughout the years.

Rori, she had all what I can only dream of. But she lost it and now the memories so precious to her will always be overshadowed by the death of her beloved mother and father. I can't even imagine how it has to tear her apart. At the same time, a nastily selfish part of myself realizes she's all mine. She has noone to turn to but me. Like I got nobody but her.

She allows me to undress her, slowly, her leaning into every touch, every caress. When we make love this night, it is all gentle and tender, a soothing reassurance for both of us that we are here for each other, that we are together. She needs me to be as close to her as possible. And I need her so much it makes me dizzy thinking about it.

Later she cries herself to sleep while I hold her. It's alright, kitten. A wound like that doesn't heal easily. Maybe it never does. Her father told her to not look back. Easier said than done.

When Rori has fallen asleep in my arms, I lie awake in the darkness, listening to the sounds of the night and Rori's steady breathing. It's then I feel that there could be a future I haven't yet dared to dream about. At the same time I realize how lonely I truly have been before Rori stumbled into my life. And I know, losing her would break my heart forever. It'll be nothing I could ever recover from. Ever.

The next morning I wake with my pillow soaked with something wet and sticky. I open my eyes and stare at an open mouth with sharp teeth and a long red tongue haning out of it. "Barkley," I growl, poking the dog. He must have snuck into the tent at night and squeezed himself in between Rori and me. Again. I really have to talk to Rori about that. I don't want to be greeted by dog-breath and drool first thing in the morning. "You're such a big baby!"

The mabari whines and licks my face. "Ewww, stop that! I don't want your kisses." He woofs and whines. "Ohh, alright!" I pet him and scratch him behind the ears. "You're such a good boy, such a strong and mighty warhound. Now get lost and leave me alone with your mistress."

Rori is still fast asleep and for a moment I just enjoy watching her. She looks so very young and at peace. I bend down to kiss the tip of her nose, then challenge myself to kiss every cute little freckle on her nose and cheeks. And what can I say? I kiss her awake and we move on from there -and in the end I make love to her again. And this got nothing to do with the sweet, tender and beautiful encounter we shared last night. Well, it still is beautiful... and steamy... Rori is on her hands and knees, I'm behind her... and we probably wake the whole camp. I swear, we don't do that on purpose. Well, I don't do that on purpose. Rori, I'm not so sure. I really, really try to do it more silently. But at some point all control just vanishes.

"Alistair, may I have a word?" Wynne says when I return from my morning washing and shaving routine with Rori in tow. She has become part of that ritual and ever since we first spent the night together, the ritual has been changed to... well, let's say it has become a whole lot more active. Wynne sits at the campfire with a mug of coffee and is smart enough to pour Rori a cup right away. Sipping her coffee, she goes to feed Barkley.

"Of course - anything for my favouritest mage ever." I smile. I am in a rather good mood this morning. Probably because I can't complain at all about how my day started.
"It seems you and our fearless leader are inseparable these days. Joined at the hip, almost," Wynne remarks ever so friendly.

I blush a deep crimson. "That's a bit of an overstatement, don't you think?" Alright, Rori has given up on putting up her tent. It's rather useless as she spends her nights with me anyway. And yes, we do make love before we go to sleep. Sometimes two times in a row, depending on how tired we are. And in the morning either after waking up or during our bath - or both. And when we wake at night from nightmares. When we set up camp and can slip away, claiming we collect firewood...

Err...

Joined at the hip somehow doesn't seem that much an overstatement anymore, now that I'm thinking about it. What can I say? I love Rori. And she's so bewitchingly beautiful. I'm addicted to her like a templar to lyrium. And I just need my daily dose. More or less. More often more than less.

"Well then, now that you're in an intimate relationship, you should learn about where babies really come from," Wynne says sweetly in that grandmotherly tone of hers.

"Pardon?" I squeak and almost choke on my coffee. She cannot... she certainly won't... Blast! She will.

Wynne mercilessly goes on: "I know the Chantry says you dream about your babies and the good Fade spirits take them out of the Fade and leave them in your arms...but that's not true. Actually what happens is that when a girl and a boy really love each other..."

"Andraste's flaming sword! I know where babies come from!" I cry, spilling my hot coffee over the front of my shirt. Ow! Blast! Now I swear under my breath and try to wiggle out of the wet and smudged cloth.

"Do you? Do you really?" Wynne still sits there, acting all nice and friendly. She sips her coffee as if she was talking about the weather. A bit chilly today, it smells of snow, don't you think so?

"I certainly hope so," I snap, looking around for Rori to rescue me. Of course she's nowhere to be seen. Only Zevran and that's what I'd call out of the frying pan into the fire.

"Oh, all right then. Aww, look, you're all red and mottled. How cute," Wynne chirps and chuckles.

Oh! Now I get it! That nasty old hag! "You did that on purpose!"

"Now, now Alistair, why would I do such a thing?" She even has the nerve to look all docile. But I can see through that mask. That smile, that's not nice and sweet... it's evil. And mean!

"Because you're wicked. That frail old lady act? I'm so not fooled. I'm on to you now." I point my finger sharply at the chuckling old mage and storm off - only to be stopped by Zevran.

"Alistair, my good friend, may I offer a piece of advice? Considering your tactics..."

Oh no! I'm not being fooled again. "Oh, you say this is about tactics, but I so know it isn't! I'm not a complete idiot, you know. And I'm not going to have any of that. Tactics! You have to try better."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I am talking about."

"Sorry, I don't. All I wanted to say, I totally understand that you feel the urge to protect Rori. I would
feel the same if that beautiful little Fereldan rose was mine."

While I consider punching him in the face because although I do not understand what he's aiming for, I am quite sure it has to be something dirty, Zevran goes on: "Still, you shouldn't just drop everything you're doing to run to rescue her in battle. If you can't fight that urge maybe you should plan our tactics for battle in a way that keeps you near her?"

I blink. I blink again. I frown. More blinking. "Err... uhm... so what are we talking about here for real?"

"Tactics," Zevran says slowly. He looks at me as if I was about to sprout a second head. "Are you feeling okay, Alistair?"

"Ahhh... haha... and you're for sure not about to lick some long hard object and shove it down your throat?"

Now the elf grins so wickedly I am fearing for my safety. "Well, not unless you ask nicely," he purrs and inches closer.

"Err... I think I must go. Go. Yes. Go now..." I hurry away, the sound of the elf's roaring laughter following me.
How to Find a Qunari Sword in a Haystack

Chapter Notes

Satinalia is a holiday in Thedas in Firstfall (November).

As we're already in that area, we travel farther north until we arrive above Orzammar. Sten doesn't like this at all and his usual grumpiness reaches a point where he even unnerves Barkley. Above Orzammar, a settlement has been built, mostly tents and wagons but also some houses made of wood or stone.

"What are we doing here?" Sten grumbles after he has trudged behind Rori for a while.

"We are looking for that merchant over there." Rori points at a man with a face like a rat.

"Is that another way to deceive the archdemon?" Sten asks icily.

"No, it's for deceiving a grumpy Qunari," Rori laughs. "I'm hoping to lure him into believing I'm not as incompetent as he thinks." She strolls towards the man she's been seeking out. "Hello, you happen to be Fayrn? The guy that stole from the Qunari back at Lake Calenhad?"

Fayrn squirms, looking even more like a rat, as he tries to talk his way out of this unsuccessfully. "You'd better give his sword to him, Fayrn. I would if I was you. Life is so short. You don't want it to become any shorter, do you?" Rori says ever so sweetly. In moments like that you just have to be scared of her.

"I... I don't have it any more..."

"Well, where is it?" Rori says impatiently, tapping her foot.

Fayrn isn't the brightest crayon in the box as he still thinks he could possibly bargain when Sten, standing right behind Rori, is towering over him and piercing him with glares that could scare the archdemon away. Rori listens to him for a while, then she says ever so nonchalantly: "Just tear his arms out, Sten."

Sten doesn't have to tear at anything. The moment he as much as moves a little finger, Fayrn starts spilling the news to us. Sten's sword is in Redcliffe. "Now, isn't that great," Rori chirps cheerfully and claps her hands. "We have to go there anyway. So no further delay on our mission of slaying the archdemon!" Rubbing it in now, isn't she?

"Let's not waste anymore time then. I cannot wait for being reunited with my sword."

I guess that's the Qunari way of saying thanks.

We manage to sell most of the bulky stuff from the dragon's treasure to the merchants - and are still loaded with so much gold we scream for being robbed. Not that I would advise this to anybody. Rori - after persuading Zevran to share - allows Shale to keep the sapphire. The golem is so fond of it, I swear it actually smiles. The golem, not the sapphire. We all get some pocket money for ourselves and Leliana at once darts off to find a shoemaker.
Barkley and I follow Rori when she looks at the stalls. Rori gets everybody a present. Zevran in exchange for giving up the sapphire. gets dressed in soft but strong Antivan leather from head to toe. As he's always freezing, Rori finds him a fine fur-lined coat. He's as happy as a child on Satinalia and smacks a kiss to Rori's cheek. Morrigan gets all excited about a golden framed mirror Rori chooses for her. She keeps staring at her reflection, adjusting the tiara on her head. She even practices different expression that range from icy to hostile. She really should try with friendly for a change.

For Wynne Rori finds a bottle of fine red wine. Seems we're getting to hear more stories about Wynne's adventures tonight at the campfire. Wine makes her rather talkative. At the baker's Rori buys the stickiest, sweetest sugar-frosted cake she can possibly find. It's adorned with marzipan roses. I get sick only by looking at it but I guess Sten will be delighted.

At the butcher's Barkley is rewarded with a steak, although he, too, wouldn't have minded the cake. For Leliana Rori finds a pair of boots that don't look as if they are made for walking. Rori wears soft leather jackboots with low wedge heels. It certainly makes her hips sway more when she walks but its not a hindrance in battle. These shoes here for the bard... the heels are thin and high, forcing a woman to balance on her toes. The leather is shiny and adorned with a series of little gems. I think they are horrendous but I just know Leliana will love them.

I keep myself busy at another market stall selling little stone carvings while Rori is at the shoemaker's. One statuette catches my interest, it's a small stone dragon. It's a fine piece of art, capturing the terrifying beauty of a dragon. I pick it up a few times only to put it back down again. In the end I decide I should save my money for something I really need. The more am I surprised to find Rori presenting it to me when we have already left that area of the market. She must have seen me admiring it.

In the end she has spent all her pocket money - and she has not bought a single thing for herself.

At the same time nobody else has been thinking about giving her anything. I watch her hand out the gifts, watch the others get excited. And when it's my turn I can't really enjoy her giving the stone dragon to me.

"I thought you liked it," Rori says, seeing my expression.

"I do. It is beautiful. But... you shouldn't have... It's not necessary to give me any presents." She looks at me with her big blue eyes, seeming rather confused. I smile softly. "Thank you, kitten. It's lovely." Then I kiss her and she smiles back at me. Now, I really feel like a complete jerk. While Leliana drags Rori away to the tailor - she needs a dress matching her new shoes -, I hurry back to a market stall I've seen earlier. I would have gone there but Rori seemed to avoid it, so I didn't have a chance as I didn't want to leave her alone.

The luthier looks up from the lute he's working at when I approach. "Can I help you?" he asks. I have no clue about instruments. My singing voice is not that bad. In the Chantry I was a choirboy. But when it comes to instruments I am glad to be able to tell the difference between a lute and a bagpipe. So yes, he can help me.

When I return to our meeting point, I have to wait an hour for Leliana and Rori to return. The bard looks giddy, Rori tired and exasperated.

"What's in the parcel?" Rori asks but I only shrug.

"Nothing important," I lie. I'm not going to give this to her while everybody else is watching. This calls for a private moment. I want Rori all for myself when I give her my gift. In addition I don't
really know how she will react first seeing what I got for her. My gift will bring back memories to her. I still feel it's exactly what she needs.

Things we want to keep but don't need at the moment, we drop with Inga Dryden, one of Levi's cousins. She looks totally like Levi without a beard but a pair of very large breasts instead. She promises she'll take the things back to Warden's Peak. Seems Levi and his clan are busy rebuilding the fortress. For now I guess, that's the place coming closest to what I'd call home. At least we got somewhere to go to. And it's quite defendable.

Rori relieves us of some more coins, making a deal with Inga that allows the merchant to buy more goods - with our gold - and gives us a credit with the Drydens and a discount for anything we buy from them.

"I got a letter for you from that crazy old mage," Inga Dryden informs Rori when business talk is over.

"Is he much of a problem?" Rori frowns while she opens the letter. I peek over her shoulder, reading along. Avernus has used one of the Grey Warden's ciphers Rori isn't yet used to, so she needs me to read the letter anyway. I at least recall enough letters to finally make sense of the message.

"He wants the permission to use... rats for his research," I summarise the information. Then there follows a long rant of Avernus complaining how he cannot possibly find out anything without any more tests. "Says he needs lyrium. And he wants some darkspawn. Alive. And then there's a long, long list of books."

"That's quite some wish list," Rori groans, leaning against me. "What should I do? I don't want to come back to a fortress crammed with rat abominations. If anything goes wrong we could have sealed the veil for nothing."

"We have quite a rat problem. Nobody would miss them," Inga Dryden comments.

"What in the name of the Maker does he need darkspawn for?" I know Rori thinks this is important. She gets excited whenever she talks about the possibilities Avernus' researches offer - if he is successful. "Rori, you shouldn't decide this right away. I know how you feel about this. But Avernus has proven to be ruthless when it comes to his studies. There is nobody there to watch him but the Drydens - and they are not prepared for what can happen when a mage loses control."

I got to know. The templar training was all about fighting mages. Even after joining the Grey Wardens I've not stopped training on my own - although I don't taking lyrium anymore, I still can use my templar skills. That's why I doubt the lyrium was actually necessary to learn them. I suspect it's just the Chantry keeping the templars under control. Duncan thankfully didn't insist I keep taking lyrium. The withdrawal was equally unpleasant as the Joining. But I managed and now I'm fine.

"Alright, then lets see if we can find someone to babysit him. Until then I'll tell him I have to think about it. Inga, can the Drydens get Avernus his books? I will pay for them."

I'm glad Rori listened to me. It makes me feel a lot better about the matter that she doesn't take this lightly, that, no matter what benefit she believes will come of this, she won't reach for it at any cost. It makes me proud of her. She might not think of herself as someone special, someone able to do something great. I do. I can see it in her but I also see she's not larger than life. This is part of why I love her.

"Do you want to talk to Wynne about Avernus?" I ask. Maybe the granny mage can offer some advice.
"No. This is Grey Warden business. And I already know exactly what she will say." Rori sighs. Then she does a rather good imitation of that look on Wynne's face when she's lecturing her. "Rori, dear, you have to accept the things you cannot change. This is your duty, the sacrifice you have to make as you serve the people you seek to protect and blablablabla."

I chuckle. "Wynne really gets on your nerves sometimes, doesn't she?"

"No kidding," Rori groans. "She's sweet. I adore her. But sometimes... sometimes I just wish she'd... shut the fuck up." I laugh at her exasperated expression and the forcefulness of her words.

"And what about the rats?" Inga asks after Rori decided Avernus would not get to use them for his tests for now.

"How about cats?" Rori points at where Sten sits on a rock with a little kitten at his feet. He has tied a string to a stick and fastened a piece of dried meat at the other end of the twine, waving it in front of the kitten. The little fur ball paws at the meat and tries to catch it. A rather silly grin is plastered across Sten's usually stern face.

"Awww, now look at that," Leliana giggles. "He's such a big softie!"

"You going to rub that in, right?" I grin.

"Of course I will. I'm already looking forward to it. Maybe I write a song about Sten the Softie," the bard muses.

"Just don't get yourself killed," Rori laughs.
Conspiracy

Teagan comes running down the long staircase that leads to the main entrance of Redcliffe Castle when we arrive in the main court. "You have returned! Have you found the ashes? Please tell me you did! Please tell me, this is more than just a legend. We have tried to heal Eamon with magic ever since you left - but nothing worked."

"We have the ashes," I say hastily, handing the reins of my horse to the stable boy. "How is the Arl?"

"He gets weaker with every passing day. The spells the mages cast have prevented the worst but there is no more time to waste now you are here. Follow me." Teagan doesn't give us any time to get settled, but leads Rori and me into the castle to meet with the mages that will prepare the potion and the ritual that hopefully will cure the Arl.

"That's it?" Teagan asks when Rori produces the white handkerchief with my name stitched right across it from one of the satchels at her belt. This time she gets the right one at once and Teagan curiously examines the ashes. "I... somehow thought it would be more impressive."

"Well, it's ashes. What did you think they would look like? Maybe they glow in the dark. We haven't checked on that," I chuckle.

"They don't have to look impressive as long as what they do is," Rori remarks dryly.

"I can feel the raw magical power," one of the mages whispers in awe, taking the handkerchief carefully from Rori. "It will take a few hours to prepare the ritual. We would prefer not to be disturbed."

"Seems we are dismissed." Rori yawns and stretches like a cat. I like when she does that. The way she arches her back pushes her bosom forward and makes her blouse stretch to a point where it almost bursts open.

"You have to be tired and hungry. Excuse me for being such a bad host," Teagan mumbles and I notice I am not the only one staring at Rori's breasts. Obviously even the glory of the ashes of Andraste pales in comparison to watching Rori stretch because the whole group of mages ogles her, too. I don't know at who to glare first, so I glower in general. "Maybe you would like to take a bath," Teagan offers amiably.

"Oh, that would be awesome!" Rori exclaims.

"Let me show you..."

"I still know my way around," I interrupt before Teagan can take her arm. "I can show her." My tone might be a bit hostile because both Teagan and Rori blink at me confusedly - although I'm quite sure Teagan knows very well what annoys me. Rori is clueless.

"Did I miss something?" she murmurs when I lead her out of the room, possessively holding on to her. Teagan follows us, chuckling with undisguised amusement.

"Nothing," I growl.

"You may know your way around, still let me talk to the servants. The lady might want one of the rooms that have their own bathtub instead of using the bathhouse," Teagan offers. I don't like the
way he talks about Rori and her bath. It makes me think of skin slick and glistening wet and of foam on her busty breasts. Don't get me wrong, that's a very nice thought. Exciting. But I get the impression he is having the very same thoughts and that is quite annoying.

Teagan doesn't disappear although I wish he would. I like him. I really do as long as he leaves my woman alone. He stops in front of a door that leads to one of the guest rooms.

"Your room, Mylady," Teagan says pleasantly, waiting for her to enter. She stands on the threshold, looking at me with hungry eyes. I stare back at her with as much desire - just Teagan won't go away. "Alistair, your room is over there," he explains, pointing at the door right across the corridor.

"Right," I mumble, wishing him to poof! but of course he won't. So I as slowly turn away as Rori closes her door. Once I'm in my room I force myself to count slowly to ten, using the time to start unstrapping my armour. Then I burst out of my room half undressed, colliding with Rori in the middle of the corridor. I catch her before my momentum can throw her down. She pulls herself up at the same time, wrapping her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. We're kissing fiercely before we even tumble into her room. When I turn to kick the door shut, I catch sight of Teagan out of the corner of my eyes. He's standing a few steps down the corridor, gawking slack-mouthed. I really can't care about that now and I don't have enough blood left in my head to blush, so I just slam the door shut.

We tear at our clothes until everything lies on the floor in chaos. Rori pulls at me and I stumble over one of her boots, taking her with me, we both fall into the bathtub head over heels. When we surface again, most of the water has splashed on the wooden floor and soaked our clothes and the carpet. The servants later will want to murder us for the mess we made.

Rori all wet and glistening is even more beautiful than I imagined. I pull her in my lap, urging her to mount me. She's eager to please me. And I am more than willing to return the favour. We make mad love in the bathtub before we move on to tenderly wash each other. When the water is cold and our skin's all shrivelled, I lift her out of the tub and wrap her in one of the soft towels. Then I carry her towards the bed. I've never made love to her in a bed before. It's always been my tent or some place in the open. Once or twice a barn. A bed is luxury.

I dry her and myself before slipping under the blankets next to her. Rori contently snuggles to me, running her hand across my chest and belly. She likes the firmness of my muscles. It's probably as hard for her to keep her hands of my pecs and abs as it is for me to stop fondling her breasts. I could do that all day long. It's soothing. And exciting. And it just feels... great. I also love sucking at her nipples. That probably says a lot about my psychology profile. But as long as she likes it, too, I guess I don't have to worry too much.

We both enjoy each others company when my eyes are drawn to her open backpack and the control rod sticking out of it. "What for did Zevran stuff that in his mouth?" I ask, pulling it out of her backpack. I've been wondering about that ever since he did it.

"Mhmmm," Rori hums. Instead of answering, she shifts out of my embrace and kneels next to me in all her naked glory. Maker's Breath, she's beautiful.

She bites her lips and by her thoughtful expression I see she's trying to make up her mind. "Ahh, it's rather difficult to explain. I better show you." I'm not sure I like that impish grin combined with her so obviously being nervous. She pulls the blanket away in one fluid motion, causing me to complain. "It's rather cold, you know..." Any further complaints are drowned by my grunt of both surprise and pleasure when Rori curls her fingers around my shaft and at the same time bends to flick her tongue at my glans. It sends such a forceful bolt rushing down my spine that I am still trying to recover when she has already sucked my length into her mouth. I am too thrilled, too shocked to say anything that
I can tell she's testing, trying to get accustomed to what she is doing - and that already feels heavenly. I can't even imagine what it could feel like if she knew what she was doing. But I am more than willing to let her practice on me until she has found out. My fingers clutch the bedcloth while she sucks at me, gagging whenever she takes too much into her mouth. I'm not entirely sure she's enjoying this as much as I do and I for sure don't want her to feel uncomfortable. So I collect all my willpower to stop her.

"Ro-ro-rori," I manage to pant, reaching down to entangle my fingers with the soft curls of her bright red hair. "Don't."

I don't have to tell her twice. She looks at me with wide round eyes, her rosebud lips slightly swollen. "You don't like it." She sounds disappointed.

"No, I don't. I'm loving it. But..." Really, talking has never before been so damn hard. I pull her into my arms. "I don't want you to do anything that isn't as much pleasure for you as it is for me. And you gagging on me doesn't sound as if it was much fun for you."

She smiles. "Always a gentleman,"

"Hmmm, let's see if we can find something we both can enjoy."

We can.

Afterwards we're both utterly spent. Rori is already half asleep when she mumbles: "Zevran said there was a trick how to swallow it. Didn't listen. Have to ask him sometime."

I'm too tired to tell her no.

I wake to someone shaking me. My sleepy brain needs a few seconds to make me realize that it is indeed Teagan standing in front of the bed. The very bed I am lying in - naked. And as if that wasn't enough, I'm not alone. Rori is here with me and as far as I remember she is naked, too.

Doom!

"I knocked at the door for the last ten minutes. And I shouted. But you just didn't answer. That woman travelling with you, Morrigan, she thought she saw you both leave the room. So I didn't think... I just wanted to make sure...," he apologizes when he sees the shocked look on my face. At least I am not the only one to think this is utterly awkward.

I am going to murder Morrigan and nobody will stop me.

My first reaction when I find myself able to move again, is to check if Rori is decently covered. Still fast asleep, she lies prone with her head resting at my shoulder, one arm sprawled across my chest. The blanket has slipped down to our waists - so she's certainly far from decently covered and I hurry to change that.

"Well, I'm awake now," I growl. I'm beyond bashful and embarrassed. Someone should invent some magical device that allows people to go back in time. I'd be the first to buy it. "No need for you to stay any longer."

Teagan nods, taking a look around the room at the mess we made. Our clothes lie scattered on the soaked floor, we've knocked over a chair and right at Teagan's feet lies the control rod. He picks it up and examines it. If Rori asked me now what I thought it looked like, asparagus would be the last
thing on my mind.

"Alistair..." Teagan begins, weighing the rod in his hands. "What do they actually teach you at the Chantry?"

"You'd be utterly disappointed," I mumble, pulling the blanket over both my and Rori's heads. I so do hope that Teagan will be gone when I emerge from beneath the blanket again. And then I can pretend that he wasn't there at all, that this all was a horrible nightmare, the epitome of embarrassment and awkwardness.

"The mages have completed the potion. We're ready for the ritual in case you want to join." I hear Teagan say with obvious amusement.

I swear they all do that on purpose. Wynne, Morrigan, Zevran, Leliana... even the golem. This is a conspiracy. They probably have statistics of Who-made-Alistair-flush highscores. They are all wicked. And mean. Most of all Morrigan.
"So, Teagan walked in on us?" Rori asks when we both hurry down the corridors towards Eamon's room after we've dressed hastily. Rori is half hopping, half walking as she still tries to put on her second boot.

"He didn't exactly walk in on us doing... well, you know... on us..."

"Licking a lamppost?" Rori suggests.

I almost stumble over my own feet at her words. "You know, after what you did today, I'm not sure I'll be able to use that comparison ever again." It sounded so innocent when I first came up with it, like nothing dirty... but now... whoa... is it only me or is it quite hot in here?

We arrive a little late and Isolde glares at us as if she's about to skin us alive. Rori pokes her tongue out at her when she turn her back at us. She couldn't stand her from the very beginning when Isolde persuaded Teagan to return to the castle with her. Although Rori is mostly responsible for saving her son, the feeling is mutual on Isolde's side. I nudge Rori's rips. "Behave," I hiss.

"Why?" she whispers. "Fantasizing about spanking me again?"

I bite my lips to prevent me from grinning. "Don't you challenge me"

"This is all an empty promise."

The mage performing the ritual turns to silence us with a glare and we both shut up before someone could decide it's frog time for us.

What I always find astonishing when it comes to magic is how fast it works and what it can do. Five minutes of waving hands and murmuring strange words in an ancient language and a man who has been condemned to die rises from the dead. Well, Eamon isn't completely dead. But almost. When you see that raw power, it's amazing and terribly scary at the same time.

I think it's a bit odd to be here in this room that smells of illness and decay. Eamon lies in his bed, deathly pale. It's a rather private moment and I don't get why Isolde and Teagan insisted on us being here with them. We're not family. Rori for sure isn't and I - well, they made it quite clear I am not a long time ago. Rori feels equally uneasy, shifting her weight next to me uncomfortably. I take her hand in mine and soothingly caress her palm with my thumb. She smiles and gently squeezes my hand in response.

It really is awkward to see Eamon open his eyes and hear him ask for his wife and son. Rori and I stay in the background well out of sight. When Isolde kneels down to take Eamon's hand, Rori begins to slowly and silently inch towards the door, dragging me along. I don't object. Eamon means a lot to me. More probably than I will ever admit. But this scene... it once more shows me that I am an outsider. I don't belong here and I am thankful that Rori is with me because she is as much in the wrong place at the wrong time as I am.

"Much has happened since you fell ill, Brother," Teagan says solemnly when Rori quietly pushes the door open. "Some of it will not be... easy for you to hear."

"Then tell me. I wish to hear all of it," Eamon replies with determination.

We are half out of the door when he spots us and calls us back. "Alistair? What are you doing here?"
I freeze and Rori freezes with me and we both turn to see everybody staring at us. Well, at me. "I... I... uhm... it's nice to see you again, my lord," I stammer.

"Alistair is responsible for your healing, Brother," Teagan explains.

"Oh, no, no, I'm not. This is all Rori's doing." I push her to stand in the spotlight. The glare she shoots me, makes me wince.

"Maybe I should spank you," she coos ever so sweetly. It's no more than a whisper but in the silence of this room you could have heard a pin drop. Teagan almost chokes when trying to suppress his laughter. Isolde is so indignant I wouldn't be surprised if she had us both sent away to the Chantry if only this was possible.

"Is this some private joke?" Eamon asks, looking from Rori to me. "Don't I know you, young lady?"

"This is Teyrn Cousland's youngest, Brother."

"Bryce's little spitfire," Eamon chuckles. "Ah, yes, now I remember. How is your father, Lady Rori?"

"He is dead." Rori says curtly. The smile she has only just forced forward is wiped off her face at Eamon's question.

"Dead? How?"

"As I said, Brother, much has happened."

"Then why am I still here in bed? Meet me in the hall in half an hour. I don't want to have to digest all these bad news when wearing nothing but my pajamas."

Rori and I flee from the room, when Isolde starts fussing over her husband. We collect the rest of our companions to meet with us in the hall so we won't have to tell the tale over and over again. When Eamon finally enters, his knees a bit wobbly, we are all assembled, waiting for him.

"Lady Rori, you have my deepest sympathy. Your father and I have known each other for a very long time. Would you tell me what has happened?"

She inhales deeply, trying to find the words to express what she still cannot accept. I take her hand, squeezing it lightly. A gesture that doesn't stay unnoticed, especially since I do not let go of her hand anymore. I couldn't if I wanted. Rori's fingers curl tightly around mine and I'd have to pull myself free from her grasp - but of course I won't. Eamon can raise his eyebrows and look at me questioningly all he wants, I don't care.

"They are all dead. Father, Mother. My sister-in-law. My nephew. I do not know of my brother. Fergus wasn't in Highhever when Howe attacked. It was treachery. He fooled my father into believing his troops were late and Father sent Fergus and the Cousland knights away to Ostagar. The night after they left, Howe's men arrived. Once inside the castle they slaughtered everybody." Rori's voice is empty of all emotion. This doesn't get easier for her no matter how often she has to tell her story. "This is no coincidence. Howe's betrayal, the rebellion of the mages, your poisoning, Cailan's death."

"Wait! What did you say? Cailan is dead?" Eamon has listened silently, sitting in his chair with his head bent, his arms resting on his knees. Now he jumps up, pacing the room. Cailan was his nephew, his sister's son. "The king... is dead? Are you sure."
"We paid him our last respect on our return to Ostagar. Yes, my lord, he is dead. He died in the battle against the darkspawn. But it was as much Loghain's treachery that killed him as it was the darkspawn." The memory still hurts. Those of us who have fought in Ostagar will never forget it.

Rori and I tell him about Ostagar, about Loghain's plan and how we fought to light that damn beacon. A beacon never meant to be lit. And without us, Loghain now wouldn't have to explain why he retreated. There never would have been a fire if Cailan hadn't decided not to let Loghain's men light it. Too bad his plan didn't work out.

Teagan fills him in on Eamon's own poisoning and the rising of the undead, with Rori and I adding the missing pieces about the spying elf and what occurred at the Circle. The only one who stays silent is Isolde. She doesn't offer a single word of explanation why she hired a mage as a teacher for her son.

"This is most troubling," Eamon finally declares.

"That's quite an understatement, don't you think?" Rori mumbles. "This is a fucking huge peck of trouble!"

"Language!" Wynne hisses from behind.

"There is so much to be done, that is true," Eamon agrees with Rori, not commenting on her lack of proper manners. Well, he said he knew her father. And he obviously has met her before. He probably knows what to expect of the Cousland spitfire. "But I should first be thankful to those who have already done so much." He motions at Rori. "Lady Rori... or would you rather be addressed as a Grey Warden now? You have not only saved my life but kept my family safe as well. I am in your debt. Will you permit me to offer you a reward for your service?"

"Oh, that's really not necessary. You help us get rid of Loghain and save Ferelden from getting overrun by darkspawn. I think that should be enough of a reward."

"Are you nuts?" Zevran comments. "He's rich! Ask for money!"

"Zev," Rori hisses back at him. "We've stolen a dragon's treasure. We're probably richer than him. With all that gold you could buy his castle."

"Nah, he can keep that old masonry. It's moist and cold in here and there's a draught near every window."

"Well, I am glad you will let me keep the castle of my ancestors," Eamon comments. "I wasn't thinking of a payment but of something to honour you. So allow me to declare you and all those travelling with you Champions of Redcliffe. You will always be a welcomed guest in these halls."

"Honour doesn't buy me no drinks," Zevran says sullenly. I kick his shin.

"Or jewelry," Morrigan adds. I kick her shin, too. She beats me over the head with her staff in return but before I can counterattack, Wynne makes us stand appart like two students having gotten into a fight in one of her classrooms. I am so tempted to stick my tongue out at Morrigan but I pull myself together and try to behave before anybody gets the impression my story of having been brought up by flying dogs could be true after all.

"We should speak of Loghain, Brother," Teagan says. "There is no telling what he will do once he learns of your recovery."

"He hopefully will be hopping mad," Rori remarks.
"As he already hired the Crows unsuccessfully I doubt he will have a second try. I am afraid I didn't do any good for the reputation of my former employers." The elf doesn't sound sorry at all. Actually the thought of having angered the Crows seems to make him quite cheerful.

"Loghain instigates a civil war, even though the darkspawn are on our very doorstep. Long I have known him. He is a sensible man, one who never desired power." Eamon shakes his head in disbelief.

"Sensible is not the word I'd use to describe him," I mutter. More likely treacherous, false, viperish, mean, evil... well, you get the impression.

"I was there when he announced he was taking control of the throne, Eamon. He is mad with ambition, I tell you," Teagan says forcefully. Loghain must have made quite an impression on him, too.

"Mad indeed. Mad enough to kill Cailan, to attempt to kill myself and destroy my lands."

"I don't think this is about madness," Rori interrupts. "It's all about Orlais. Loghain still hasn't gotten it into his head that the times of war between Orlais and Ferelden are over. Cailan was seeking an alliance with Orlais. I think... reading the letters he received from Empress Celene, he might even have considered a marriage. I don't know if Loghain knew about that. He knew about the alliance for sure. I heard Cailan and him talk about it. My father was an ambassador in Orlais. He and Cailan kept close contact on that matter. If there have been deals made, Father certainly was part of them. The Guerrins and the Couslands were Cailan's most powerful allies. And they were both friendly with Orlais."

"She's a rather smart girl, isn't she?" Teagan murmurs next to me.

"And there I thought they chose her for the Grey Wardens because of her pretty face," I comment.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Morrigan snorts. "You wouldn't recognize someone of higher intelligence if they wore a sign around their neck reading SMART!"

"I thought it was her prominent attributes." Zevran sighs. "Everytime I look at her, I think to myself: Zevran, old boy, if you hadn't ogled her boobs first time you saw her, you might have won that fight."

"Let's just say she has a lot of virtues." Before I feel tempted to punch someone in the face.

"You guys realize that I am standing right here next to you, don't you?" Rori mumbles.

"Whatever happened to him, Loghain must be stopped," Eamon declares.

Fine, we can agree on that.

"What's more we can scarce afford to fight this war to its bitter end."

Not if we want there to be anything left of Ferelden for the archdemon to destroy and corrupt.

"But you can unite the nobility against Loghain, can't you?" Rori asks hopefully.

"I could unite those opposing Loghain, yes. But not all oppose him. He has some very powerful allies," Eamon says tiredly. "If your father was here, it would be easier. Maybe we could succeed. But he isn't and so it's only me. Loghain has indeed planned this well. Teyrn Cousland could have made the difference."
As there's only two teyrnirs in Ferelden, one being Highever formerly ruled by the Couslands, the other being Gwaren ruled by Loghain, the Couslands would have been the strongest of Loghain's opponents. One for sure can say a lot of things about Loghain MacTir. But he certainly is not stupid.

"But Rori is Teyrn Cousland's heir," I point out. "Shouldn't she inherit the title?"

"Are you nuts?" Rori hisses next to me. "I already got my personal mission impossible with the Blight. Don't you put a second one on top of it."

Eamon chuckles softly. "As much as I admire and respect the young lady, she is not accustomed to political gamesmanship. Many know her as Teyrn Cousland's youngest daughter - and - forgive me, lady - she has not yet made the impression that she could become an outstanding ruler like her father, although Bryce believed in her. For the moment the Couslands are defeated. The chances that declaring a new Cousland teyrna could change a thing are very low."

"No offense taken. It's true, I didn't exactly cover myself with glory." She pauses and an impish grin tugs at the corners of her mouth. "Especially the nobility that has sons of marriageable age isn't going to remember me fondly."

"Anyway, we have no time to wage a campaign against him," Eamon returns to the matter at hand. "Someone must surrender if Ferelden is to have any chance at fighting the darkspawn."

"But once everyone learns what he's done,...," Rori exclaims.

"I will spread word of Loghain's treachery, both here and against the king. But it will be but a claim made without proof. Those claims will give Loghain's allies pause, but we must combine it with a challenge Loghain cannot ignore. We need someone with a stronger claim to the throne than Loghain's daughter, the queen."

Oh no.

Is he looking at me?

Why is he looking at me?

He cannot possibly...

Doom.

DOOM!

"Are you referring to Alistair, Brother? Are you certain?" It's as if Teagan had pointed at me as everybody is staring at me now.

Say you aren't. Please say you aren't!

"I would not purpose such a thing if we had an alternative. But the unthinkable has occured."

Errr... hey! I don't like that idea but that... well, that sounds as if I was the fill-in. Not even plan B but plan C. Or plan D. Oh well, Alistair, stop fooling yourself! Of course you're a fill-in. Nobody in their right mind would make you king. They have to be completely desperate.

"You intend to put Alistair forward as king?" Rori sounds as shocked as I feel.

"Teagan and I have a claim through marriage, but we would seem opportunists not better than Loghain. Alistair's claim is by blood."
One moment please! This... this just can't be true. This is a dream. A nightmare. It has to be. One without darkspawn - which is rather rare - but still, it has to be a nightmare. I do not want to become king. They said Rori couldn't pass as a teyrna but they think I can be king? Are they all mad? "And what about me? Does anyone care what I want?" I sulk.

"You have a responsibility, Alistair. Without you Loghain wins. I would have to support him for the sake of Ferelden. Is that what you want?"

This is emotional blackmail! Eamon has to know how I feel about Loghain. How much I want him to pay. "I... but I... no, my lord." I need a drink. Or two. Good thing I know where the wine-cellar is.

"I see only one way to proceed. I will call for a Landsmeet, a gathering of all of Ferelden's nobility in the city of Denerim. There Ferelden can decide who should rule - one way or another. Then the business of fighting our true foe can begin. What say you of that, Lady Rori? I do not wish to proceed without your blessing."

"My blessing? Why should I get to say anything about that matter? I... I don't want Loghain to win... but..." She looks at me and I can see she's as trapped as I am. She knows I don't want this. I cannot be king. I do not want to be king. But it is the only way to defeat Loghain. I wish we could just kill him and that's it. Blast it, I would even consider hiring Zevran if I thought he could succeed. "I guess it's the best we can do," she finally says, sounding rather compunctious.

"There's still the matter of that mage, Jowan," Eamon sighs. "I will have to deal with him later. For now, please excuse me, I need to rest."

We are dismissed and I walk out of the hall like in a dream. Everything seems so unreal. Someone please pinch me, I think they just decided to make me king!
This feels so unreal. They want me to become king!

All my life whenever my heritage was mentioned someone made sure I understood that there was no chance - and with no I mean not the slightest bit of a chance - for me to ever become king. Not that I had any ambition! It was just fine for me that this burden wasn't mine. What hurt me about people telling me this was nothing I could achieve was the way they would treat me. As if I wasn't worth being Maric's son. It's the very same now. Eamon's words still echo in my mind. The unthinkable has occurred.

It's either Loghain or me.

That's like the choice between the devil and the deep blue sea.

I'm quite sure they plan on only using me as a puppet. Eamon will be the one to pull the strings. This sounds both comforting and terrifying. I wouldn't have to take responsibility, could still follow the lead of someone else - and I never would be allowed to do what I want.

I don't know where I'm heading. I just walk around without a destination. Someone has just pulled a rug from under my feet and I'm falling. The hole is pitch black and bottomless.

And then there's a hand taking hold of mine and the falling stops. I look up to find Rori beside me. She has grounded me again. We walk in silence until we reach the small garden in the inner court of the castle. I inhale the fresh air greedily when we burst through the doors into the open. The garden is surrounded by thick high walls, the castle looming over the rose bushes. It's like an illusion of freedom. I feel trapped.

I cannot sit down so I pace the path between the flower beds while Rori sits with her legs crossed on one of the stone benches. Bless her! She knows better than to push me or - even worse offer well meant advice I haven't asked for. Or some platitudes about duty and serving.

This garden is Isolde's. She has brought her Orlesian taste here. Too many putti, too many embellishments, too much of everything. It's as artificial as this whole farce of making me king.

"I cannot do this, Rori," I blurt out, still pacing. "How could I? I'm not prepared for this. You heard Eamon. He only chose me because there's no other option. He doesn't believe in me."

"I believe in you." Rori says calmly.

"That's real sweet, but..." Usually I value her opinion, but right now I think she's quite biased. She sees me through rose-coloured glasses. I'm not half the man she believes me to be. "Oh, Rori, what shall I do?"

"Say 'Bloody blast it!' and give it a try?"
How does she always succeed in making me laugh? "Says the woman who called me nuts when I suggested she should be teyrna."

"In case we get all this done... defeat Loghain, slay the archdemon, end the Blight... then I guess that's what I will be after all - unless Fergus is still alive. I do hope he is."

I sigh and slump down on the bench next to her, running my hands through my hair. For a while we just sit there next to each other, watching the dark clouds floating across the starlit sky. "I feel like running away."

"I know what you mean."

"You thought about it?"

"Many times," she confesses.

"What keeps you here?"

"You." She smiles and takes my hand, intertwining her fingers with mine. I smile back at her, tempted to tell her I'd run with her if she asked nicely. "And the realization that running away won't make things any better. I can run away from the battle, from the Blight, from my responsibility - but I cannot run away from myself."

Teagan was right. She is a smart girl. I still don't want to become king. But I guess it's better than not becoming king. I will never be able to look at the man in the mirror again if I let Loghain get away with this. It's weird to think about it this way. That I become king for my own sake. Not because of some responsibility or because I owe someone. Strangely it doesn't sound that terrible anymore when I look at it that way. Don't get me wrong, I'm still scared out of my mind. But I guess... I should give it a try. Bloody blast it!

"So... what do we do now?" I ask, sighing heavily.

"Oh... we still got some time until dinner..." Rori grins impishly at me.

Hey, that's not what I meant!

But she already pounces me, throwing us both backwards and off the bench. We land in a flower bed of white and pink lilies. Isolde so won't like this, having her pretty flowers smashed by two love-crazed Grey Wardens rolling around in her flower beds.

"Somewhere more private!" I manage to gasp before Rori can pull down my pants. I really have to talk to this insatiable little ginger about moderation. Then... on a second thought, maybe no...

... "Alistair, may I have a word with you." Rori and I jump apart, startled by Eamon's voice. I blush when I see him standing at the door, holding up a lantern. I can't help wondering how long he's been there, watching us kissing each other. And it has not been one of the innocent brushes of lips. I've had her with her back pushed at the bookshelf behind her, one of my hands having found its way beneath her blouse, caressing her breasts. And she had one hand down the front of my pants. When we tumbled into the library it was dark and empty and we didn't expect anybody coming here at that hour.

That much for more privacy.
Yes, yes, we got rooms but there's maids cleaning the mess we made earlier when we set Rori's room under water and I scattered the contents of my backpack all across my room in a hurried search for dry clothes. And instead of chasing them out, I just swept us both into the adjoining library. My fault. I should have seen this coming.

"If you don't mind, Lady Cousland." Eamon at least has the decency to pretend he hasn't seen anything he was not meant to see.

Even Rori's ears are bright pink when she quickly curtsies to Eamon and then hurries past him out of the room.

"You are rather fond of Lady Cousland," Eamon comments once Rori has closed the door behind her, muttering 'Blast, blast, blast!' under her breath.

"I really don't know how you got that impression," I mumble with my back turned to him while I hastily try to stuff everything back into my pants that certainly is not meant to be looked at by Arl Eamon. Really, why is this always happening to me? The conspiracy is at work again and someone is standing somewhere in the shadows, snickering and smirking.

"Is this going to be a problem?"

"What do you mean?"

"Alistair, a king cannot always follow the calling of his heart..."

"Whoa... wait... one moment! You only just decided I should be king and now you're telling me..."

"I only want you to be prepared. A political marriage could become necessary..."

"I won't listen to any of this. You cannot take her away from me." I storm past him but he grabs my arm and I don't dare to yank myself free. Glowering at him I wonder what else he has in storage. All this makes me sick to my stomach and I have to remind myself repeatedly I am doing this for myself. It doesn't sound as convincing anymore as back in the garden.

"Alistair, please... I am trying to help you and that makes me wonder how much influence she has on you. I knew her father quite well. And I got the impression, that Bryce's daughter is a little spitfire."

"Oh yes, she is." I laugh and to my surprise I don't sound as bitter as I feel. Maybe the thought of Rori butting heads with Eamon cheers me up. I'd place my bet on the ginger.

"So, is it you making your decisions or is it her dictating them? You are about to become king. I have to know what I am dealing with." Already worried Rori could cause trouble? Well, she certainly will. Trouble is her second name. Go and try telling her she's got to end our relationship because I should consider a political marriage!

"If she dictated my decisions she'd not be the only one," I snap. "It was neither my idea nor my wish to become king. You said it was my duty."

"Alistair, if there was another choice..."

Anger, I guess, is far better than whining. It for sure is a way to release the tension. I really don't know where I find the courage to talk to the Arl like that. Blame Rori. She's the one who told me I got to look after myself more often. Right now I feel like I'd be stripped of everything that's dear to me if I don't fight back. I am not going to put up a brave front here. "See, that's another thing that doesn't sit well with me. You and Teagan didn't seem to be exactly thrilled by the thought of me
becoming king. I'm a fill-in you don't believe in."

"Alistair... no, that's not what I mean." Eamon sets the lantern down on the long table in the middle of the library and pulls a chair out for me to take a seat before he sits down himself. I prefer to stand, though, my arms crossed in front of my chest. Sighing, Eamon rubs his face tiredly. Sadness and sorrow make him look older than he is.

"Maric hated to be king." His voice is no more than a whisper and I think I must have misunderstood. Maric? Maric the Saviour? "He was a good king but it didn't make him happy. He never felt he could live up to the expectations people had in him. You are so very much like him."

I'm stunned. Stumbling backwards I fall on the chair Eamon has prepared for me. I've never heard Eamon talk about my father. For years I've tried to learn more about my parents, but all I got were curt answers. Everybody was clearly avoiding the topic and whenever I insisted they would get mad at me. Maric always had been a far away figure to me. Someone larger than life. The man who had not wanted me near him.

"Your mother knew how unhappy it made him. It was the reason why she didn't want him to raise you. She didn't want that life for you, the burden of being a king's bastard and a possible rival to Cailan. She believed it would make your life a misery just like your father's. I think she'd have rather kept your heritage a complete mystery, to not let you know at all Maric was your father. But it proved impossible. Too many knew and although we tried not to let the rumour spread, we couldn't keep it from you."

"Well, you did for quite some time," I remark dryly. I have to clear my throat twice to actually manage to speak at all.

I remember well when I first learnt that King Maric the Saviour was my father. There had been comments before, whispers when I passed by, people staring at me. I was too young to understand. But then I was there when Isolde confronted Eamon. She didn't care I heard her, acted as if I wasn't there.

It was a winter's day, shortly after my ninth birthday. Eamon was in his study with me. I loved when he invited me to join him there. He would look at books with me, teach me heraldry and history. I was always so eager to learn. I yearned for his praise, that little bit of attention he gave me. When Isolde came in that very day, I was sitting next to him with my head bent over a book. I looked up to greet her but her glare silenced me. I didn't understand what I had done wrong to make her despise me. She didn't beat around the bush. She told Eamon to his face she wouldn't live in the same household with his bastard. Eamon sighed and told her I wasn't his son. He had told her so often but she wouldn't believe it because he wouldn't give away who my father was. They had a fight that night. It was real bad. They shouted at each other, Isolde threw books at Eamon... and I was the cause of all this. In the end Eamon snapped at her: "Maric is his father. He's the king's bastard."

It was like he'd slapped me in the face. I was standing there like rooted to the spot. All those years whenever I asked about my father, they told me they didn't know. It was a lie. They had lied to me all the time. And suddenly the whispers and the nasty remarks began to make sense. At that very moment I couldn't even cry. The tears came later. At night when I was alone in my bed in that chamber above the stables, I clung to my golem doll and cried myself to sleep. Until I hadn't known of my father I at least could pretend Eamon had kept me because... he really cared for me. But then I learnt he had only kept me out of loyalty to his king. And when he sent me away, he proved me right. Sure, he objected to Isolde's wish for a whole year but in the end, he still sent me away. I still remember every single word of what Isolde told him: "If the king doesn't want to care for his own bastard, why should we? Send him away to the Chantry, that's where such as him go."
I begged and I cried, I threw a tantrum. It was useless. The night before Eamon took me to the Chantry, I stood in front of the small mirror shard in my chamber, looking at the reflection of that skinny ten-year old with his hazel eyes and his unruly blonde hair - and I so wished I could be someone else, someone anybody could love. When the gates of the Chantry closed behind me the next day, I felt like the loneliest child in all Thedas.

"Isn't it ironic?" Eamon chuckles without any amusement, making me return to the present. "Your mother so wanted to prevent you being burdened with your royal heritage - and now here you are about to become king. That's what she wanted to protect you from."

I cannot get rid of the feeling there's something he won't tell me. Yet another secret. The way he talks about my mother, I can hardly believe he's referring to the maid they keep telling me is my mother. Would Maric have confessed to a mere maid he happened to run in at Redcliffe Castle? Hardly. But do I dare to ask? Can I cope with any more of this tonight?

"My mother... who was she?" I blurt out while Eamon is brooding over some long ago memory.

"You know who she was," Eamon says quickly when I'm about to ask him again. The way he avoids to look me in the eyes I am quite sure I do not know.

"She didn't want me to know, right?" My voice is shaking. Everything I ever believed to be true comes tumbling down on me.

Silence is consent, I guess.

"Who was she?" I insist. Strangely the clearest thought in my mind is: Hey, then that shrew Goldanna isn't your sister! Ain't you lucky!

"I do not know, Alistair. They never told me. The only one who knew was your father... and he is gone." Eamon's expression is pained. This is not easy for him but for once I so do not care. If he thinks this is hard, he can try and walk in my shoes.

"Did that even belong to her?" I snap angrily, knocking over my chair when I jump back to my feet. I pull the amulet of Andraste from around my neck and shove it at Eamon. It has a meaning to me. One because I believed it to be my mother's, two because Eamon putting it back together has to mean something, hasn't it? But maybe this is also a lie. All my life has been a lie. Why did she do this? What right did she have to keep my family background a secret? What could be so bad that she felt she had to protect me from the truth? That's the thought that finally calms me down. She wanted to protect me. She cared.

"Yes, it did belong to her. You already wore it as a baby when Loghain brought you here."

My fingers close around the amulet again, and squeezing my eyes shut, I press it to my heart.

Then I flee out of the constriction of the room. Eamon doesn't even try to stop me. I feel like I cannot breathe anymore, the air is thick and suffocating. The pressure on my chest makes me dizzy.

I know this place like the back of my hand. I run until I can't breathe anymore and a sharp stinging pain stabs my side. Only then do I stop, dropping to my knees. I'm high up on the top of the western tower. I had to climb through a gap in the roof to get here. It's been one of my favourite hiding places when I was a boy. They never found me here. I felt so lonely, sitting high above everybody else on the tiles of that roof was quite fitting my situation. While I gasp for air, I try to fight back the tears. In the end I just give in. It's been too much pressure, too much death, too much of anything. And I guess as nobody sees or hears me here, I can cry like a little baby.
I'm still shaken by my sobs when someone softly whispers my name. I turn to see Rori peeking through the gap in the tiles. How in the name of the Maker did she find me? When Barkley's large head appears next to her, I know the dog is to blame. She gives the mabari a dog cookie, then sends him away. I really don't want her to see me crying. It's not exactly manly. At the same time I don't want her to leave. It's the first time ever I'm not alone on this roof. Without saying a word, she hugs me and gently kisses my tears away. I look into her huge blue eyes and all I see is concern and love. She's not put off by my display of weakness and vulnerability.

I rest my head against her bosom while she holds me, listening to her heartbeat and her song. I love how she sings to me when she comforts me. She's here with me without asking any questions, without demanding an explanation.

Oh, Rori, there's no words to express how much I love you.
The Benefits of Dressing Tables

Standing in front of the mirror above the dressing table, I stare at my reflection while Rori buttons my shirt. The man in the mirror frowns at me, his hazel eyes squinted. I turn my head to examine my side-face. There's not a single trace of my mother in me. All I see is Maric. Eamon has a painting of him and Queen Rowan in his study. It's really not hard to believe I'm the king's bastard. We got the same blonde hair, although Maric's reached down to his shoulders while I keep it cut short. We share the same aquiline nose, the firm jawline. Only Cailan was even more Maric's image.

"Not liking what you see, handsome?" Rori asks, wrapping her arms around my neck from behind as she looks over my shoulder. Her skin is so delicately pale compared to mine. This isn't much of a summer - not even for Fereldan standards - but I still have a tan from all the time I spend outside. Rori is as pale as always - with a myriad of the cutest freckles on her nose and cheeks. I love every single one.

"I look like Maric," I sigh.

"No surprise. You are his son."

"I... I just thought, there'd also be a hint of my mother." Now I know even less about her than before when they made me believe her to be a maid. At least they could give me descriptions of what she looked like. They could give me a name. Now, I got nothing but the knowledge that she sought to protect me. What can be so terrible that she didn't want me to know? Who is she?

Rori rubs her cheek at mine like a cat to comfort me. "You could try to find out?"

"I could... until then... we stick to Eamon's story. We don't need anybody poking around in my past and find something they can use against me to weaken my claim of the throne."

"Wow. Already having kingly thoughts, haven't you?"

"If I have to do this, then I'm going to do it right. At least... I will try."

"That's my man!" She kisses my cheek and I turn to meet her, claiming her lips hungrily. "Hey! We'll be late for dinner!" She slaps my hands away playfully when I try to pull her dress off her shoulders. "Behave! Better help me lacing that blasted corset dress." She turns her back to me and bending over the dressing table, she clutches its sides for support. "You got to pull the laces tightly... but please leave me some room to breathe!"

I stare at her reflection in the mirror and the very last thing on my mind is getting her dressed. Quite the contrary. Sighing, I run my hands up her back - completely ignoring the laces - over her shoulders and down the front of her body until I cup her breasts.

"Alistair!" she scolds me. But the way she's glowering at me across the mirror cannot fool me. I know her too well. "We're going to be late for din..." A moan escapes her when I pinch her nipples, pressing my hips against her backside at the same time to make her feel my arousal. "Oh, blast it!" Rori breathes. "I think we can have a little appetizer before the main course..."

"Little?" I growl, reaching into my pants. "What do you call little?" There's one thing I really love about dresses - it's so easy to get to where you want to be. No awkward fumbling and pulling when you try to get your woman out of her pants. You just lift her skirt and push down her panties - and voilà!
Oh, what a sight!

The dress has slipped off her shoulders, revealing her breasts. She is delicately bent over the dressing table with her firm little ass raised, her legs slightly parted to secure her stance.

I cannot help it. It's too tempting. The way she wiggles her ass impatiently while I still admire her, rubbing my hands at her buttocks, it's like she's challenging me. "Keep still," I murmur and as she won't, I lift my hand and smack her buttocks.

She gasps and her eyes widen with shock and surprise. "Did you... did you just... spank me?" she pants.

Oh blast! What in the name of the Maker did I think I was doing? "Errr... uhm... I'm... I'm sorry... I didn't mean... did it hurt?"

"Do it again!"

"WHAT???

She cannot possibly like this! Okay, I didn't slap her hard. I don't really want to hurt her... And that smacking sound when my hand met her flesh, the way she winced and whimpered... was somewhat... exciting.

We both look into the mirror, our eyes meeting across the reflection.

"Alistair..." she gasps, her expression feral, her eyes wide and hungry and dark with a desire I haven't yet seen in them. I just look like the fool I am. Like a very confused and horny fool.

Alright then... I pet her lower backside gently.

"Noooo!" Rori wails. She's about to get up and turn around but I won't let her. I like her right where she is now, so I hold her in place, pushing her down once more with one hand.

"Stay where you are." And then I smack her again, making her gasp in reply.

I cannot believe this!

I am beating up a woman and she likes it!

Another slap. I swear my hands move on their own accord! Part of me is too shocked to really comprehend what is happening. The other part is enjoying the sight of her pale skin burning red where my palm meets her buttocks.

Alright. Enough. I can't stand this anymore. This is far more than I can handle. Rori's had enough, too.

I look as shaken and guilty as I feel. Rori's face is flushed, the look on her face a mixture of shame and lust. She's trembling slightly.

"Are you... alright?" I ask timidly, hoping beyond hope I didn't hurt her when I know for sure I did. I don't feel like her asking for this is any excuse on my side.

She nods. "Are you?"

"Not sure."
I run my hands soothingly across her skin, wincing at the sight of the reddish imprint of my fingers. I am glad the signs already begin to fade.

Our eyes meet again when Rori nudges me with her backside.

She cannot possibly...

She can.

Well, we're back on save ground here. Just making love to each other without any kinkiness.

Unless one counts me watching her in the mirror while I thrust into her as kinky.

The way her boobs sway with every move, the look on her face caught in between pleasure and tension, her lips slightly parted, her eyes half closed...

If I ever become king I definitely want a dressing table in my royal bedchambers. And a mirror right above it.

...

Surprisingly we aren't late for dinner, although it took me ages to lace Rori's dress. Actually we are just in time for the servants to get us seated. I sit right next to Teagan, the second to the right side with Eamon at the head of the table. Rori completely ignores the place pointed out to her on the left side next to Isolde and instead slumps down beside me. The look she shoots Eamon, when he opens his mouth to correct her, is clearly defiant. Shaking his head, he let's her have it her way.

The servants quickly rearrange the seating order as it's not only Eamon and his family and Rori's party but also some nobility he has invited. Probably to announce my claim of the throne and introduce me to the lords and ladies.

Doom.

I'm already sweating, shifting nervously on my seat. Rori next to me shifts as well. She seems utterly embarrassed, avoiding to look at anybody.

"What's wrong?" I whisper.

Everybody has taken their seats, so Eamon gets up for a toast.

And in that very moment when all the assembled lords and ladies and knights and our companions raise their glasses, that short moment of complete silence, Rori whispers to me breathlessly: "I've forgotten to put my panties back on."

Boy, she has some timing!

I just stare at her in shock, Ser Perth almost chokes on his drink, Teagan spits his out all over the table. The room is deathly quiet and everybody is staring at Rori. I almost feel sorry for her. She sinks back into her chair as if she has every intention to vanish under the table when Zevran bursts into a roaring laughter. "Never thought you'd really do that! So, I owe you five silvers, right?" the elf chuckles.

I stare at him in mere disbelief. Then at Rori. But as she looks as stunned as I am, I take it she has no clue what Zevran is talking about.

"Ten silvers, Zevran." Rori hurries to straighten herself and put on a smug smile.
"Fine. Ten. You won that bet fair and straight." He slightly bows to her and grins, winking at both of us.

"What was that all about?" I hiss at Rori when the other guests in the room begin to relax. Some even chuckle or laugh, one elderly bann wags a finger at her scoldingly.

"Just play along," Rori hisses back. "And remind me that I owe Zevran a favour."

We survive the rest of the dinner without any more catastrophes and I am almost daring to hope that I will get out of this alive and still kicking. Leliana tells a lot of tales about our adventures. She is a good story teller but I don't like the way the lords and ladies keep looking my way when she praises my fighting skills, my wits, my... leadership?

Hey, did I miss something? Since when have I been leading? I didn't lead anybody anywhere. Bad things happen when I lead. We get lost, people die, and the next thing you know I'm stranded somewhere without any pants.

Okay, me stranding anywhere without my pants nowadays could also be Rori's fault.

Absolutely it would be her fault.

"Leliana, can I talk to you... now!" I grab her arm to drag her away from a group of guests after she has finished the tale of Rori's and my battle at the Tower of Ishal. It was a grand tale, really. I'd be utterly impressed if I didn't know what it really was like. And if the hero of her story hadn't been me.

"Excuse me please, my dear lords and ladies," Leiiana curtsies and smiles pleasantly before she follows me to a quiet corner of the room.

"What is this all about? The things you make up about me... half of what you say is not true!"

"Alistair, darling, you are about to challenge Loghain. If you want to have the slightest chance to become king, we do have to work on your reputation. At this very moment you are a nobody who happens to be King Maric's bastard. Even worse, Loghain has marked you a kingslayer. He will use that against you and claim the Grey Wardens planned to murder Cailan to make you king."

"Oh," is all I can think about to say. I didn't waste a single thought on that yet. For me it was all about the Landsmeet and Eamon introducing me there. But I guess Leliana is right. I am Maric's son but in times like this, that's not enough.

"Don't worry, Alistair. I'm a bard. That's what I can do best. These stories will be remembered, they will be retold. In the meanwhile, just be your amiable self and talk to the people here. Charm them. You know how that works."

"I do?" All I know is how to be awkward. I am the King of Awkwardness.

And Rori is my Queen.

"Oh yes. It comes naturally. You remind them of your father. Many here have known him personally. It seems there's more of Maric in you than you ever thought." She smiles, pinches my cheek and then floats away to tell more lies about me.

I groan and, closing my eyes, I rub my forehead. I so wish I could be elsewhere. Preferably somewhere private with the young panty-less lady.

"You know, Alistair, Antiva has a long tradition of royal bastards." Zevran makes me jump. He
moves without making any sound at all. In the dim light his elven eyes glow, reminding me of a cat sneaking upon a mouse.

"You don't say?" I look around for an escape but there's only the lords and ladies. Rori got cornered by an elderly bann. The smile on her face is a sweet fake, she's slightly flushed and bashful, shifting uncomfortably and kneading her hands.

I snatch a glass of wine from the tray of a passing by servant and down it in one go. Maybe this gets any better when I am drunk. I've turned my back to Zevran - not the smartest idea considering he's an assassin - but as his mission today seems to torture me with both his words and presence, I do not fear but hope for a quick ending.

"Oh, yes. They've led wars to claim the throne. Some of them have become kings. In fact, I'd say the current royal line in Antiva stems from bastard blood several times over," Zevran informs me, sounding almost cheerful.

"Well aren't you just chock full of useless trivia today." Go and talk to someone else! I don't want to hear about any royal bastards at the far end of Thedas. I'm busy being one myself.

"Sadly, whenever a royal bastard rears their head in public and declares themselves, it often goes poorly for them." Zevran sighs heavily, shaking his head sadly.

"Let me guess: they get assassinated?"

"Only the very popular ones."

Isn't it great? Here I am, supposed to make myself more popular. Eamon and Leliana think it will raise my chances to actually become king. Obviously it will also make it more likely for me to get murdered. Well, the darkspawn probably will beat any assassin to it. What a comforting thought.

"And the unpopular ones?" I know I shouldn't ask. But I hardly ever do what is good for me.

"Well, they get by somehow, I'm sure. There was one fellow who did quite well working as a prostitute based on his uncanny resemblance to the king. Charged a fortune."

I wonder if Zevran overheard people pointing out my resemblance to Maric. They tell little stories about him. How he kept falling off his horse when he was a young man about my age. How him being a bad horseman saved his life several times. One mentions his sudden disappearance about twenty years ago and how Loghain had the whole army running around Ferelden to look for him. That was about the only interesting thing I've heard all night long - next to Rori's confession - but unfortunately the old bann only could tell that Maric returned sound and save. It probably got something to do with Orlais.

"Couldn't afford him, I take it?" I comment on Zevran's obvious hinting of me being my father's lookalike.

The elf chuckles pleasantly. "That cynicism will serve you well, my friend. Hold onto it."
Somehow Rori has persuaded Eamon to send Jowan back to the Circle. After what he has done, there will be no happy ending for him. The templars either will execute him or he will participate in the Rite of Tranquility.

"I'd rather die." Rori shudders when I explain to her what I have learnt about the Tranquils while still at the Chantry. "This... this is horrible! It's cruel."

"Then the mages are no danger anymore..."

"They are not human anymore!" Rori snaps. "They are no more than an empty vessel, a shadow of their former selves. Everything they have once been is gone. Their hopes, dreams, fears, their grief and sorrow, their love - everything is gone! They are like walking dead! There's no joy for them anymore in their lives."

"But they don't know about all that," I point out. "They have no desires anymore, no regrets. And some of them have led miserable lives."

"That doesn't make it any better!" She kicks a stone, sending it scattering down the road. We're on our way to Redcliffe to retrieve Sten's sword before we take Jowan back to the Circle. We head in that direction anyway, so we save Eamon the effort to alarm the templars or have Jowan escorted by some of his knights. I cannot get rid of the feeling, though, that Rori has something on her mind she won't tell me.

"Rori, some mages even choose to become Tranquils. And it is not an easy decision for the Knight Commander. Mages who are made Tranquils without their consent either cannot or don't want to control their magic. It is the responsibility of the Knight Commander to keep anybody save from uncontrolled magic. And when it's either killing them or keeping them alive as Tranquils... don't you think it is an act of mercy?"

"No. No, I don't think so." She doesn't wait for a reply but storms off. I know better than to follow her. She's upset and furious now and it is best to give her some room then. I'm not the only one who had to learn that the hard way. Rori is capable of throwing things at you when you push her the wrong way.

There's no arguing with her about that matter, anyway. Rori is rather spirited. To her tranquility has to sound like a horrible fate. But that's not the way you got to look upon that matter. She's no mage. It will never happen to her. And she will never be the same danger a mage out of control can be.

She has calmed down again by the time we're back at the castle, with a stupidly grinning Sten in tow. At least I think that strangely crooked shape of his mouth could be something similar to a smile.

Rori's way to say sorry after one of her moods is to just pounce and kiss me fiercely. By now I know her well enough to see it coming, so I am better prepared for her assault. And it's really a nice way to make up after an argument. Even better when it doesn't end there.

Jowan squints his eyes when he is lead out into the open by Eamon's guards. The weeks spent in the dungeon haven't done him any good. His eyes are sunken in, his skin ashen. He has lost weight and hasn't shaved for an eternity. The way he shuffles his feet and slumps his shoulders, he gives the impression of a man who has said goodbye to life.

"I am glad this horrible man will now get what he deserves," Isolde sighs in relief when the knights
tie the rope that is attached to the bonds around Jowan's hands to Rori's saddle. She looks awfully uncomfortable, frowning down at the guards and at Isolde, standing beside her husband.

"Unfortunatly that doesn't apply to all who have done wrong," Rori says icily as she slips out of her saddle, untying the rope again. She then grabs the reins of one of our extra horses we use when the others grow tired.

Isolde's lips tremble when she tries to keep her voice under control. "If you hadn't saved my son..." she hisses, coming face to face with Rori.

"Don't waste your time with false gratitude. I did this for Alistair. And for Connor," Rori growls, her fists clenched at her sides.

"Oh, no, no, my dear friend." Zevran holds me back when I am about to intervene. "Never, never ever get yourself involved in a cat fight. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

"But..."

"They both will scratch your eyes out. Just stand back and enjoy." He turns around at the others. "Any bets?"

"Five silvers on Rori," Leliana whispers.

Meanwhile Isolde makes her next move, completely ignoring Eamon's halfhearted try to silence her. "Alistair will soon notice you're no more than a tart stripped off her power and lands and using him as your tool to regain both!"

Rori hisses like a cat but before she can as much as say a single word, I ignore Zevran's advice, and step in. "Enough! Lady Rori, mount your horse, please." She stares at me, stunned. "Now."

I am prepared for a retort. A fight. An argument. But... nothing. She just inclines her head. Then she does as she is told.

Wow.

That was... easy. Too easy.

I turn my attention on Isolde who greets me with a smug smile. "Your behaviour is not appropriate, Lady Isolde. You will not talk to Lady Rori like that."

The smile slips off her face and is replaced by an expression caught in between shock and surprise. Seeking help from Eamon, she finds him equally flabbergasted.

"Shale," I move on to the golem. "Please lift Jowan onto the horse." Usually the golem talks back. I have not once seen it do something you ask it to do without a smug remark or an argument. But this time the walking statue obeys without hesitation.

A curt nod is my farewell for Eamon and Teagan, then I march towards my horse, mount and ride out of the courtyard. I do not wait for the others, expecting them to follow - and they do.

I can't get rid of the feeling everybody is staring at me but I fight the urge to look back over my shoulder, fearing I could fall out of the saddle if I did. This all went far too smoothly, I am still waiting for something really awkward to happen.

When we are out of sight of Castle Redcliffe, I let out a heavy sigh. I haven't even realized the
intensity of tension until now. I cannot tell what upset me so much about that little scene - it was really nothing big - until I hear Rori's voice calling me. "Prince Alistair!"

Now I really almost fall off my horse when I turn abruptly, pulling sharply at the reins. Rori has been calling me prince before when she's been teasing me. But now she doesn't sound like teasing. There's an earnestness to her tone that scares me. There's pride in her eyes and her smile when she looks at me. Then she inclines her head once more like she has done before back in the court of Redcliffe Castle. I haven't identified it as a gesture of respect then, but that's just what it is. Worse though, Wynne, Leliana and Zevran follow suit.

Now I am really scared.

For the first time ever I am glad for Morrigan rolling her eyes and pulling a face. If she bowed, too, I'd be running for the hills now.

"Hey, whoa! Stop that! Stop! That's... creepy!"

"You were totally awesome back at the castle!"

"What? I... I didn't do nothing at all!" I just stopped two women getting into a fight. That's certainly nothing impressive.

"You had such a kingly authority!" Rori rejoices. "I mean, right, you didn't save the world, but there was something in the way you held yourself... you got... presence... a kingly presence. It was absolutely amazing!"

"You like it when I order you around? You're developing some rather strange tastes, young lady. Should I be worried?"

"I'm not worried. So why should you be?" Rori smiles impishly at me.

Now I am really worried.

"Okay... listen, you must have misinterpreted..."

"She wasn't the only one who saw it," Wynne interrupts. "You've shown them you're a Theirin. They all saw your father in you."

Is that supposed to comfort me? That I remind them of Maric the Saviour?

I think it's disturbing. I am not my father. I didn't know this man. Only now people actually begin to talk to me about him. I have to admit all the stories make him sound more like a normal man. less like a superhero. Still, he somehow managed to become a legend. And I cannot believe that's all about what bards made up about him.

"Even I was impressed," Zevran admits. "And I've seen my share of royal bastards. Seldomly they show any signs of greatness - makes it much easier to kill them." Zevran is in a gloriously good mood today. I'm quite sure that's got nothing to do with me and my kinglyness but the two young ladies that I saw sneaking out of his bedroom this morning.

"Hey, no... what are you talking about? I'm just Alistair! This... haha... you are joking, right? You're just teasing me. Right? Oh, merciful Andraste!" I groan.

"There are many great tales of lost kings who return to their lands to reign in glory...," Leliana tries with reassuring me when we move on. She's awfully cheerful about all that. I bet she has already
planned it all out, my campaign, the lies she is going to tell to get me a good reputation I do not deserve... This bard is wicked!

"I am not lost. Nor, for that matter, a king. And there is nothing glorious about me." Absolutely nothing. And you're not going to convince me of anything else no matter how hard you try.

"You are Maric's son; you are the rightful king of Ferelden."

I feel like I am going to start screaming if anybody mentions my father again.

"I am the son of... a star-struck maid and an indiscreet man who just happened to be king." At least that's what they always told me. By now I'm quite sure the part about the maid is not true. My father Shortly disappeared about twenty years ago... I'm almost twenty. Coincidence? Hardly. "Look, I can't be king. Some days I have trouble figuring out which boot goes on which foot."

"Rori forgot to put her panties back on, but you wouldn't call her a bad leader." Leliana chuckles. "Complete fools are made leaders of kingdoms all the time, Alistair, and you're not a complete fool."

"What an utter relief."

"And don't worry about the boots. Kings don't need to dress themselves. that's what advisors are for, isn't it?" Leliana leans towards me to pat my hand in a very motherly way.

"And star-struck maids, apparently."

"Those, too. And if you made Rori your Queen, she'd at least not be found attending a formal dinner without any underwear anymore. Queens have advisors, too."

Rori could become my queen - strangely what bothers me most about that idea first place are the advisors helping her with her panties. I am the only one who will ever get to dress or undress her when panties are involved - next to herself of course. Once I've gotten over that part of the possibility of her becoming my queen, I recall Eamon's warning. Political marriage could become necessary - I groan and push that thought aside. I don't want to have to worry about that. All I want is to be with Rori and enjoy her company and all the other things she has to offer. There's enough darkness flooding my life already. My love is not to be corrupted by it. I won't plan a future that might never come. With a bit of luck - a huge bit - I will live to see my 20th birthday in a few months. Blast! All this talking about kings and queens gives me a major headache.

Meanwhile three people with very flexible morals plan my political ascension. To have an Antivan assassin, an Orlesian bard and a young noblewoman raised by Fereldan's No. 1 ambassador for dealing with Orlais plan my confrontation with Loghain, stick their heads together and whisper to each other, including side glances at me, is most disturbing. When we halt for supper and for giving everybody a rest - most of all Jowan who is about to fall off his horse - they gather around me.

"You know, Maric's situation when he fought against the usurper was quite similar to yours," Leliana starts while she unwraps her sandwich. She waves it around, talking a lot with her hands, all grand gestures. "He was hiding with his army most of the time, tried not to get caught. Still he had to make himself noticed and unite the nobility. Many were scared to oppose the usurper."

"Would you please stop comparing me to Maric!" I snap. My mood doesn't get any better when Barkley snatches my sandwich out of my hand while I am busy glowering at the elf and the two redheads. "HEY!"

"Here, you can have mine." Rori with a far too sweet smile gives me her supper. I frown at her suspiciously. She and I share the Grey Warden appetite. We devour far more food than anybody else
in this party. Ever since we made the dog a Grey Warden mabari that applies to him, too. Half of the time we feel like starving and are found stuffing ourselves with snacks while we travel. And she willingly gives up her supper? Something is really rotten here - and it is not Rori's sandwich. "I am not going to like this, right?"

"I know you don't want to be compared to Maric. But people don't know you. They remember Maric and you don't inherit his throne like Cailan did. You have to fight for it. What Maric did, he met with the nobility secretly. He talked to them and tried to win them over."

"No. No way! That's far too dangerous. Loghain searches for us everywhere. We got our images on wanted posters plastered all over Ferelden," I point out. I rip the sandwich in two halves and hand one back to Rori who has been hungrily staring at it ever since she gave it up to me. Sten probably will be missing his cookies again.

"And you think it was any different with Maric?" Leliana coos. "He was hunted, too. He was in danger of treachery whenever he came out of his hiding. We have to do this. Some nobles will listen to Eamon. But Eamon will not be their king. Loghain is not some Orlesian usurper. He is the Hero of the River Dane, Maric's best friend, his daughter is the queen. We do need more than just Eamon and your Theirin blood. We need the people to adore you."

I groan.

Doom.

DOOM!

"I... I can't do that! I am here to kill darkspawn not to become the pawn in a civil war."

"You aren't a pawn, Alistair. You are the king," Rori reminds me.

"When I said I never want to become king, did you actually listen?" Usually she does. She's good at listening to people, find out what they like and what annoys them. She has managed to become friends with everybody here despite all the different characters. Even Sten, now he is reunited with his sword, calls her Kadan - whatever that means. It sounds like an endearment. He sometimes even smiles at Rori - although that looks awfully creepy.

"I did. But things have changed. Like they changed when Duncan and all the other Grey Wardens died." Practical as always, isn't she?

"Now, here's the plan... we don't just avoid the villages anymore. Zevran, Wynne and I will go there and talk to the villagers. I will sing my songs and tell my stories. We will let people know what really happened in Ostagar, Highever, Redcliffe and Kinloch Hold."

"Keep your stories short, my dear," Zevran comments. "We will certainly have to run for our lives more often than once." He chuckles when he finds Rori longingly ogling his sandwich. "I wish you only once looked at me like that. I'd die a happy man. But you have made your choice, my wild Fereldan rose." Sighing, he glances at me. "You're some lucky bastard, Alistair, my friend."

"I am for sure."

"Does that mean you won't let me have your sandwich?" Rori pouts.

Laughing, Zevran shares with her. "All she ever wants is my food. Oh, how she makes my heart bleed!"
"You don't have a heart, Zev," Rori mumbles with her mouth stuffed. She grins, winks and nudges his ribs when the elf's expression darkens.

"You are a cruel woman... but I forgive you. How could I ever be mad at a woman with a bosom like yours?" Zevran grins wolfishly at her. "Ahh, Alistair, don't you glower at me like that. I have seen you watching her as well. Her boobs bounce so nicely when she rides, especially when her horse trots."

"I... no... no, you must have been mistaken! I didn't... I never..." I stammer, blushing deeply. Oh that sight of her bouncing boobs! I stare at them most of the time and more than once have I almost fallen off my horse because I didn't pay any attention to the road but only to that soft bouncing of her beautiful breasts.

"You did not? You Fereldans just don't know how to enjoy life. I for my share love to watch her bosom. She's quite stacked, so there's a lot there to watch." He chuckles. "Morrigan is not so bad also. And her lack of clothing makes it even more interesting. I'm still waiting for that moment when everything will drop out of that tiny bra she wears. I am astonished it hasn't yet happened. Do you think she magically holds her boobs in place?"

"How did we end up talking about Morrigan's and my breasts when this was about your political campaign?" Rori whispers I don't really pay attention because I stare at her bosom. I can't help it. All that talking about boobs...

"Well, you got two really good arguments there that will help you to persuade many men to follow their rightful king," Zevran remarks matter-of-factly.

Now, isn't that fantastic? If the nobility of Ferelden recognizes me as the fool I am, the busty bosom of my love will make the difference! This is our plan B? Really?

Can we skip plan A then and move right on to plan B?

"Then who's the next bann on our way to the tower?" Leliana asks.

Obviously we can't.

Too bad.

"Excuse me please," I mumble. "I'm going to stand over there and bang my head at that tree."

I'm doing this for myself. The king-thing, not the head-banging at tree thing. I'm doing this for Duncan and for my fellow Grey Wardens. I'm doing this for Cailan. I'm doing this so that Loghain will pay for his crimes.

There's a whole lot good reasons why I should be king.

And one why I shouldn't. And that one is me.

I only notice the golem standing right next to me when suddenly with a smashing stomp, the creature steps onto a pigeon landing in front of its feet.

"Argh! Whoa! Shale! You almost gave me a heartattack!" I stumble backwards. The golem has a smug grin plastered across its face. Alright, it doesn't have much of a facial expression. But I swear this one is a smug grin. It must have been standing there completely motionless. There's breadcrumbs on the ground in front of it. The golem lured the bird into a trap.
"I find it very odd," the golem suddenly speaks. The way it turns its head I think it's talking to me.

"'It' meaning me? Am I an 'it', now, too? I feel honoured." I think, I could get used better to 'it' than to 'Prince Alistair'. Oh, what did I get myself into? If Maric had a thing for starstruck maids and whatever other women, there have to be some more bastards, right? It can't only be me? I'd only have to find them.

Grasping at straws now, aren't you?

"For one who professes to be a warrior, I find it remarkably weak-willed and indecisive."

"Er... thank you?" Am I getting bashed by a statue?

"It also likes to hide its many weaknesses behind a veil of jocularity."

Yep, I am getting bashed by a statue. Maybe I should ask it to enlighten our companions with its observations because they seem to have missed the obvious. I cannot be king! "For a statue, you know a lot of big words."

"Is there a reason it enjoys following others so much? Especially when it is in a position to lead?"

I will never get why so many people think it's such a great thing to lead. There's even some who strive to lead. That makes me wonder why they actually want to lead. I have found many of those who desperately want to be in a position of power only have themselves in mind. When there's nothing you care about but yourself, then, I guess, leading indeed could be funny. But if you do mind what happens to the people you are responsible for... well, then leadership is the cause for many, many major headaches and sleepless nights and crashed mirrors when you cannot stand looking at yourself anymore.

"Have you ever been responsible for someone else's life? Or a lot of other lives? Or an entire nation?"

"Of course not." The golem snorts.

"Then... shut... up," I snap. I am getting tired of being accused of weakness when none of them has ever once even wasted a thought on how it is to walk in my shoes. They all act as if - just because your father happens to be a king - you are born one. History proves that assumption wrong.

"I will remember this moment when the birds come." Shale murmurs, marching off.
Jowan's Fate

"Are you mad? You... you have to be mad!" I can't blame Cullen. That was my first reaction, too, when Rori told me what she had in mind.

"I asked the unicorns and they told me no," Rori replies sweetly. She's so fed up with having to argue about her decision.

"This is not funny!" Cullen snaps. The poor man looks as if he's about to faint. He pulls at his hair and paces the room. I cannot see there's much difference between his condition when we found him in the tower while it was still controlled by Uldred and now. "Knight-Commander," he pleadingly turns to Greagoir. "Trusting Irving is one thing, but allowing these..." He glares at Rori and me.

"Grey Wardens," Rori prompts politely.

"Errr..." Cullen has lost his trail of thought. I doubt Grey Wardens was what he had in mind to say. But as he is a templar by heart, being rude when a lady is around, is nothing that comes easily.

"Allowing them..." Tiny droplets of sweat appear on Cullen's brow. It's a bit like watching myself because I certainly must have made a similar impression on Rori when she asked me for my opinion on that matter. Unlike Cullen I got a much more detailed version of her plan, though. And I know Rori. I trust her. She can be stubborn but she also listens to advice. So we found an agreement we both can accept. Poor Ser Cullen will get none of that. "You cannot hand Jowan over to them! He is a convict. We saw him use bloodmagic! He deserves to die! We cannot set him free!" The poor guy will have a heart attack if he doesn't calm down. For sure he has a problem with his blood pressure, considering how red his head is.

Greagoir sits in his chair, one arm propped up. He's far from being delighted. "You ask much of us, Lady Cousland. Jowan killed some of my men. He tried to murder Arl Eamon - and still you wish to recruit him. Why?"

"There's not many Grey Wardens in Ferelden..."

"Let's be exact," I interrupt her. "There's you. Me. And the dog." And Avernus. But really, you don't mention a two-hundred year old blood mage who summoned demons and did horrible things in the name of science to two templars. That's something that will send you faster to Aeonar than you can spell your name.

"The dog is a Grey Warden?" Cullen gasps. He's clutching the back of his chair - the very one he only sat in for about the very five seconds it took Rori to say: 'I use the Right of Conscription on Jowan' - for support. Barkley woofs and wags his tail frantically.

"Are you alright?" Rori asks with concern when Cullen's eyes seem to bulge out of their sockets the way he stares at the three of us in shocked disbelief.

"No! No! I am not alright. No one ever listens, not until it's far too late." Cullen paces the room once more. He is a very upset man.

"I know I owe you," Greagoir drones tiredly. "Without your help many more would have died. But Jowan..."

"See, I don't want you to hand him over right away," Rori explains. "There's a ritual Grey Wardens have to undergo, something we call the Joining. Alistair and I have not the slightest clue how to
perform it."

Avernus has but the ingredients he had left weren't enough for a human so we used them on Barkley. Avernus was so kind to inform us that we've run out of archdemon blood. So I guess we will have to wait until after the Blight is over with our plan to rebuild the Grey Wardens in Ferelden.

"I don't understand." Greagoir frowns. Rori's request is giving him a headache. And Cullen makes it a major one.

"I kind of want you to store Jowan for me," Rori explains. "Preferably in a way he will survive sanly. Meaning, I'd very much appreciate if you didn't let him starve in a pitch black cell somewhere in the bowels of this tower."

"What makes you think we would do that?"

"What? Store him for me or lock him away under inhuman conditions?"

"Both, I guess."

"Well, the Right of Conscription doesn't know no exceptions so I can claim him and he is mine. And I thought you might want to pay back the favour you owe us."

"You are a rather straightforward young lady." Greagoir is impressed. It makes him uncomfortable, because he'd rather not allow himself to be convinced by a lithe teenage ginger to pardon a dangerous maleficar.

"You're not the first one to say so," Rori remarks smugly. "According the inhuman conditions - I just want to make sure he's not held by you like by Lady Isolde. No offense meant."

"No offense taken." Greagoir tries hard not to chuckle.

"He is a murderer!" Cullen cries in ultimate exasperation. "A blood mage! And you want him to be pardoned so that he can lead a life his victims never will have the chance to live?" The way he sways and trembles he's either on lyrium withdrawal or wondering if this is yet another nightmarish illusion he desperatedly tries to fight without success. "This... this is a trick! They are under his control! Jowan, he controls their minds!"

"And the best idea he comes up with is to make us use the Right of Conscription on him?" I mumble. "If I had mind control over Rori, I'd know a whole lot of other better things to make her do..."

Oh... wait! Do I sound like a deviant now? I do, don't I? That's... that's not how I meant it! Honestly! Hey! Why is everybody staring at me as if I said something dirty?

"You don't need no mind control," Rori laughs, nudging my ribs. "You just have to ask nicely."

"Why is everybody here acting as if this was nothing big?" Cullen shouts hysterically. Poor sod. I can only imagine how he must have suffered while the tower was under Uldred's control.

"Ser Cullen, being a Grey Warden is not a happy-ever-after life-long vacation where you get to slay some darkspawn once in a while as not to get bored," Rori says calmly, almost soothingly, turning her attention solely on the young templar. She locks her eyes with his, stepping closer until they are face to face. "It is a death sentence. And believe me, it is not a nice death."

"The Maker smiles sadly on his Grey Wardens as no sacrifice is greater than theirs,” Greagoir murmurs.
Cullen stares down at the petite female right in front of him, unable to turn away from the gaze of her dark blue eyes. Whatever he sees there, his expression softens and is replaced by sadness. "I... I... I am sorry." He looks at me with the same sorrow and sympathy. "Sorry." Barkley woofs indignantly when he is left out and Cullen pets his head absentmindedly. The dog whines happily and licks his hands.

"We do not take this lightly," Rori assures the templars. "That's why we won't take Jowan with us. I don't think we can effectively look after a maleficar while trying to unite Fereldan's nobility and thus prevent a civil war, assemble an army, kill the archdemon and end the Blight."

"Our schedule is awfully tight these days," I agree.

"You better get used to this. Kings always have an awful lot to do."

"And there people wonder why I don't want to become king," I murmur under my breath.

Cullen and Greagoir exchange a look of utter confusion. "Did we miss something?" the Knight-Commander asks warily, his eyes shifting from Rori to me.

"Errr... nothing of importance," I hurry to say but Rori is merciless. I think I am going to spank her tonight. At the moment I am having a whole lot of violent fantasies involving her and my palm connecting with her naked butt. I bite my lips to stifle a groan.

Quick!

I need an un-arousing thought... something horrendous... something like... Wynne naked at the temple of the sacred urns... ewww... Sten's naked butt... Merciful Andraste!... Morrigan adjusting her breasts when they once more have almost fallen out of what she is not wearing...

Okay, I think I'm safe now.

"Knight-Commander Greagoir, may I introduce you to Prince Alistair Theirin," Rori says solemnly, inclining her head towards me.

"I am not a Theirin," I hiss.

"Maric is your father. He was a Theirin - so are you. How should I introduce you? Alistair the Bastard Prince? Or Alistair Almost-Theirin? Using your father's last name is far easier than to start explaining about Maric and the star-struck maid, don't you think?"

"What? That... oh... I hate you."

"No, you don't." She tiptoes to kiss my cheek. I wipe her kiss away with the back of my hand defiantly. She's not going to wrap me around her little finger that easily.

"Right now I do," I sulk, crossing my arms in front of my chest. "You're as wicked as that granny mage with her frail old lady act. And that bard with her cute little girl performance. Can't I just be Alistair?"

"I will make up for this, I promise."

Greagoir and Cullen follow our argument, turning their heads from side to side.

I sigh, accepting my defeat. "Fine. I want your dessert for the next two weeks."

"What? Three days!"
"Ten."

"Five."

"Seven."

Rori curtsies most gracefully. "Seven, as you wish, your Highness." I wince at her calling me that awful title. We shake hands in agreement, anyway, although I cannot get rid of the feeling she shortchanged me.

I know her! She'll just make me feed her half of every dessert she owes me by using that upwards glance on me. And then after I've started sharing with her, she'll lick the spoon clean in a way that will make me want to drag her away to the bushes and make love to her.

"If you are looking for support from the Chantry, then I am afraid, there will be none." Greagoir's tone is wary but firm.

"We are not expecting what the Chantry cannot give," I explain before he can get the wrong idea. "Even during the war against the Orlesian usurper the Chantry didn't side with Maric. I understand that it is necessary for the Chantry to stay neutral."

"You learnt your history lessons well, Prince Alistair." Greagoir visibly relaxes when I assure him we're not here to push him even more than we have already done by forcing him to give us Jowan. "I will have to talk to Irving about the matter of Jowan. I know you have the Right of Conscription. But maybe Irving's opinion is of some interest to you, too."

"Of course it is. Anything else would be foolish," I agree. Rori next to me is smiling that smug smile of hers. She looks like the cat that got the cream. "What? What is it now?"

"You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Acting kingly!"

"Are you going to get excited about that anytime I do this... whatever it is I do?" I whisper while we follow Greagoir and Cullen to meet Irving in his study. They cleaned up most of the mess in the tower - which certainly is a good thing since last time we stumbled over corpses on our way to the top.

"At least until I've gotten used to this new side of you."

"You seem to like it."

"I admit, it's rather thrilling."

"Thrilling, huh? How thrilling?"

"Try that on me tonight and find out," she teases, grinning impishly.

Irving welcomes us warmly, although he seems a bit taken by surprise when Greagoir announces us as Prince Alistair Theirin and Lady Rori Cousland. "Oh," he says when he sees us. "It's you."

"Yeah, it's only us. Don't get yourself confused by all the titles."

"What about the dog? Did he also discover a title of nobility since we last met?" Irving inquires
when he feeds Barkley a cookie.

"He has always been the King of Hearts," Rori laughs when Barkley comes bouncing towards her.

"He's a Grey Warden." Cullen hasn't yet digested this.

"Really? I only once met a Grey Warden hound before. That must have been a little more than twenty years ago when Grey Wardens visited the tower. Ahh, it's quite a long story. But you have not come here to listen to an old man babble, have you?"

Irving doesn't like Rori's idea any better than Greagoir. But at least he's not as negative as Cullen. "And when would you collect Jowan should we agree to... store him for you?"

Rori shrugs. "I don't know. When the Blight is over, I guess. If we don't return for him, you can always do what you'd have done if we hadn't recruited him."

"What does Jowan say about all this?"

"Well... first he whined a lot. About how sorry he is. How much he regretted all this. That he does deserve to be punished..."

"At least he has some common sense," Cullen murmurs. "And he's the blood mage!"

"In the end he agreed, though."

"Well, then, I think we will grant you that wish as a reward for your help," Irving sighs. "If the Knight-Commander agrees, of course."

"I don't like this but I will not ignore the Right of Conscription. But if I as much as suspect he's using forbidden magic, I'll have him executed."

"Sounds fair," Rori agrees.

And that's how we recruit Jowan. Avernus will be so delighted. He has been asking for an apprentice and now here we found one as ruthless and questionable as his soon to be mentor. I really do hope Rori knows what she's doing. Maybe we should recruit Ser Cullen as well. Then we at least would have someone to watch over the mages. On a second thought I doubt we'd find the two of them alive and still kicking on our next return to Warden's Peak if we left them alone with Cullen. Couldn't even blame him. If Rori wasn't as convincing as she is - especially when she's on her knees and... well, lets just say, she can be rather persuasive.
The Mage-Templar-Hitch

The atmosphere of the tower is so oppressive it suffocates even Rori's cheerfulness and makes her brooding. The mages hurry along the corridors, voices muffled, eyes cast down, shoulders slumped, pressing to the sides mostly as if they try not to be seen by the watchful eyes of the templars.

"I cannot understand how Wynne could stand it here. Even without all the abominations and demons it is horrible here!" she murmurs when we follow Ser Cullen to the dining room. We've been invited for supper, simply because it would be suicidal to climb into that nutshell of a boat right now.

The sky is almost black, a sharp wind whips at the few slim birch trees at the shore and the dark waters of Lake Calenhad. Rain pours down, drumming at the windows of the tower.

The meal takes place in a wide hall with several long tables and benches in rows. On a dais stands another table where the Knight-Commander, the First Enchanter and the more important templars dine. Below the mages have taken seat with some heavily armed templars patrolling the hall, looking over the shoulders of those they have to guard. I don't know if this is normal or if Greagoir has taken special precautions after Uldred's rebellion. Ser Cullen shifts uneasily in his chair next to Greagoir. He keeps watching the mages with squinted eyes, his lips a thin line of grim determination.

It is quiet in here. Nobody talks, not even in a hushed whisper. It awfully reminds me of the dinners at the Chantry that were held in silence with one sister or brother reciting from the Chant of Light. It was horrible! Whenever I entered the dining hall, I felt the uncontrollable urge to say something. Anything.

And I found ways to break that silence.

Like when I scribbled a note for Sister Astrid, informing her of the fat black spider sitting on her head. There was no spider but... oh, that look on her face was priceless! She jumped off the bench and started screaming shrilly while she shook her head wildly to get rid of the non-existent spider. I almost fell of my bench, laughing.

Or one time when Brother Roland was reading from the Chant of Light with his long pauses and a voice so monotonous and low that a Tranquil sounds spirited compared to Roland, I just couldn't help mocking him.

And once when nobody was looking, I slipped under the table, crawled to the far end and reappeared right next to the Revered Mother with a loud BOO! Oh, I cannot even count how many pots I had to scrub.

Right now, I feel that awful itchy sensation again, that urge to babble and break the silence. Especially when I see one of the older mages climb a little ladder that leads to a lectern above the dining tables. He clutches a very thick book that looks awfully boring.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Rori greets our hosts as we take our seats, frowning at the fact that they only nod in reply. If she had been raised in the Chantry she'd know better.

Greagoir clears his throat. "We dine in silence," he whispers.

"Really? Why? Isn't that awfully boring? Fergus and I made it a game when we were kids, who could stay silent longer. I always lost," Rori babbles way too cheerfully. For someone who doesn't know her, she probably seems quite her usual self. But she's far from feeling comfortable. I know by the way she squeezes my hand under the table as if she attempted to break it. She beams at the
frowning Knight-Commander in such a disarming manner that one can see his resistance melt.

"Well," Greagoir chuckles, admitting his defeat. "I think as we have guests tonight, we can have an exception to the rule."

Rori sighs in relief and so do I.

"Alas, this allows me to ask one question that has been bothering me all day long." Irving steeples his fingers as he props his arms up on the table. "Prince Alistair, the assistance you have asked for considering the contracts of the Grey Wardens, do you also intend to use this obligation to secure your claim of the throne?"

Blast it! Maybe silence isn't such a bad thing after all. At least I don't have to answer questions I don't feel capable of responding to. My mouth suddenly is awfully dry and I have to take a sip of water before I can even attempt to answer.

"No, First Enchanter Irving, I have no such intentions. This is a matter solely concerning the Grey Wardens. I may be the heir of the throne but for now I am a Grey Warden and my only goal is to end the Blight. It is very unfortunate that Ferelden is also facing a civil war in times like this but I will not misuse the Grey Wardens as kingmakers as such is not their responsibility. It is but a mere coincidence that I happen to be both a king's son and a Grey Warden. Who is to rule Ferelden will be decided at the Landsmeet - hopefully without any more bloodshed."

"Forgive my wariness, your Highness."

Every time he calls me Highness, I have to remind myself he's addressing me and not someone else. It's awkward but every attempt of making them call me Alistair fails. They just ignore my request. If I thought people would listen to me once I am to become king, then my hope fails at the stubborn ignorance of the templars and mages to consider something as simple as the way I'd like them to address me. It's as if I had said nothing at all. At least that's something I'm familiar with.

"No offense taken, First Enchanter."

Rori nudges me in a way that could be accidentally but when I look she gives me thumbs up, keeping her hands under the table so that nobody can see.

I guess, that means I haven't made a complete fool of myself. But as I am not the only walking-talking catastrophe here, I think, I better make sure, Rori isn't going to offer any more confessions. "You don't happen to have forgotten something important once again?" I whisper in her ear.

"Like putting my panties back on? You should know, Alistair. You checked twice before we came here," she retorts with the sweetest smile. "You'd like to have another look?"

"As much as I'd love to, I'm afraid, I have to recline. But I might get back to that offer later."

The mages still have their dinner in silence. It's as if we are actors on a stage performing a play for an unwilling audience. It doesn't feel right. Neither for me nor for Rori or anybody else in this hall.

Meanwhile Rori tries to cheer up Ser Cullen by bombarding him with questions he only answers because he's a polite man. "So, where are you from, Ser Cullen?"

"From a small village in the south. Honnleath. You probably have never heard of it." He keeps watching the mages, never faltering in his alertness. Rori could dance the Remigold naked and he wouldn't as much as glance at her.
"Actually we've only been there recently." Rori admits after a short moment of hesitation.

"Really?" For a very brief moment Cullen's attention is drawn away from the mages. "There's a statue in the middle of the village square, it's actually a golem."

"Well, it's not there anymore," I remark. Like most of the villagers. With the difference that the golem is quite well while most of the villagers are dead. Rori and I exchange a look. Should we tell him that Honnleath was overrun by darkspawn? He could have family there but he already has so much to cope with. Rori would want to know no matter how much it hurt. I... I think Ser Cullen should get the chance to recover from what he had to endure during the rebellion of the mages before he learns of more tragedies. I fear he could break down. So I shake my head no. Rori doesn't look happy but she doesn't object.

"Gone? I wonder what happened to it," Cullen murmurs, unaware of the silent argument that has taken place in front of him. "They wouldn't have removed it, would they? It was rather popular."

"It's travelling with us."

"You are in control of the golem!? The villagers always said its control rod was broken." 

"Well, it is broken. Sort of. We could activate the golem but we cannot control it."

"Then how...?"

"It has its own free will."

That has her the attention of Irving and all the templars and of all mages sitting close enough to be eavesdropping.

"That is most remarkable," Irving comments. "I have never heard of a golem with a free will. Do you think I could examine it?"

"Shale - that's what it calls itself - well, it isn't really fond of mages."

"Maybe we should recruit it then," Cullen remarks dryly.

While Irving questions me about Shale, Rori keeps looking over her shoulder at the silently dining mages. Her expression is one of sympathy and concern. To her it has to look like a prison. The strict rules of the tower make sense when you know what this is all about. In the Chantry silence during dinners was no more than a matter of discipline and respect. Here, it is a way to protect the templars.

It's not easy to be a templar. You have to watch over the mages, watch for a sign of demonic possession, and if you see it, you must not falter. You have to be ready to kill them. Forming relationships with the mages, being friendly with them - it makes things difficult. That's why we get trained from the very beginning to not fraternize with mages. Some even stop thinking of them as human beings. I never managed to make myself look down upon a mage like that. I am wary around mages - okay, paranoid. But I could never forget what they are.

Well, Morrigan, she makes it very hard for me to believe she could be human. I doubt I'd have much problems killing her should she turn into an abomination. Although I doubt she could get much worse, possessed or not.

We both are utterly relieved and glad to get out of the tower again. And Cullen is utterly relieved and glad to get rid of us. He accompanies us to the shore to make sure we really climb into that boat. No offense taken. The man does his job and he's good at it. If I was him, I'd be highly suspicious of two
Grey Wardens recruiting a bloodmage who committed horrible crimes.

Jowan's excuse - although he didn't call it an excuse, he had that much decency - was that he defended his love, a female initiate. Rori's far too practical to simply be touched by a sad story. Although it probably was influencing her decision to recruit him. She wouldn't have done so, if Jowan had simply been power-hungry.

Back at the Spoiled Princess, when Rori comes to my room, she's still perturbed by the atmosphere of the tower.

"I feel sorry for those who can't leave that place. Mages and templars likewise." She pushes a wooden case aside to sit on my bed. She's so beautiful tonight in that simple dark blue dress. It's a bit crinkled from her having it stuffed into her backpack, but it's still pretty.

"Unfortunately it is necessary. Templars and mages cannot be friends."

"You are friends with Wynne."

"And it would break my heart if I had to kill her."

Rori nods. She's not happy with this but there's really nothing she can do about it. She has other battles to fight.

"When are you going to tell me what this is?" She knocks her knuckles at the wooden case. "You've been dragging it around for a while now."

"I am utterly surprised you haven't yet been snooping," I tease, pulling a clean but equally crinkled shirt from my backpack. It has a hole or two but at least it is clean. "I'm afraid I'll be more looking like a bastard than a king tonight."

"I never snoop!" she protests, arms akimbo.

Oh, beware the wrath of a ginger!

She's so cute when she's trying to be mad at me.

"Yes? Then what would you call your attempts to find Sten's cookie hiding places? The poor guy has been trying to keep his cookies safe from you so desperately, I feel sorry for him."

"It's a game. That's got nothing to do with snooping," she insists, poking the wooden case curiously. "Do you know where he hides them? I haven't found them for some time," she adds sullenly, pulling the box closer to examine the locks.

"That's because he stuffs them in between his underwear. The filthy ones." Grinning I watch her poke and turn the wooden case.

"Ewwww. He can keep those!" She pulls a face, sticking out her tongue.

"Hardly," I chuckle. "Now you aren't stealing from him anymore, Barkley is."

"This dog knows no decency." She looks questioningly at me and I know she dies to know what's in that case. I pretend I do not notice the curiosity in her large blue eyes or the way she tilts her head and bites her lips. "Alistair," she finally whines. "What's in that box?"

"Alright. It's a gift. For you."
"For me?" she squeals girlishly. "Then why haven't you given it to me yet?"

"I wanted to wait for the perfect moment..."

"Alistair, every moment is a perfect moment for a gift! Especially when it's one for me." She bounces on the bed excitedly. "Can I open it? Do you have the keys?"

"They have to be somewhere..." I start looking around but by the time I find them Rori has picked the locks. "Impatient thieving magpie!"

"It's not thieving when it belongs to me," she points out, lifting the lid. "Oh... oh, Alistair!" She's awestruck. Carefully she touches the shining wood of the fiddle before she takes it in her hands, admiring it. It's not a pretentious instrument but very simple in it's beauty, still Rori loves it. She presses it to her chest and squeals in delight. Then she pounces me, fiddle still in hand.

"Careful, careful!" I laugh but she silences me with a kiss that ends us both in bed together. If this is her way of saying thank you, I should give her presents more often. Her dress is even more crinkled afterwards. I lie prone and lazily watch her in all her naked beauty as she tunes the fiddle. The first few notes sound more like someone scratching their fingernails across a blackboard.

"What a pleasant melody. You should play for the archdemon if you ever get the chance. This certainly is a better weapon than floral arrangements."

She smacks my naked butt with the bow. "I haven't played in a while. And I never claimed I was a virtuoso." Concentrating, with the tip of her tongue sticking out between her lips, Rori gives it another try. She's bewitchingly cute. This time she also does much better. It is a simple tune but beautifully interpreted, a rather popular folksong I've already heard in taverns. She's so giddily joyful it transfers into her play and what she lacks in skill, she compensates with her charm.

"Better?"

"Much." I kiss the tip of her nose and smile at her lovingly. "In case we fail as Grey Wardens you can start a second career as street musician, I do my rounds with the hat to collect the coins and Barkley can learn some tricks."

"We'd be starving," she laughs, putting the fiddle away.

"Then we better succeed in slaying the archdemon, right?"
Nuzzle the Mussel

We take the route towards the sea instead of following the North Road to Denerim. That takes us closer to Highever which is quite a risk, considering what happened to the teyrn. Rori is awfully upset but she tries to hide it, only allowing her mask to slip when she is alone with me. She cries a lot these days with all the memories she connects to the places so familiar to her. I have to be strong for her and there's nothing I'd rather do.

Sten isn't happy we enter the lion's den when it's the archdemon we should be hunting down instead. I'm more concerned about the banns we have decided to meet in the Coastlands. Rori knows most of them through her father. But we cannot be sure they didn't side with Howe and Loghain. At least Rori knows the area around Highever like the back of her hand. Zevran proves incredibly useful in detecting possible ambushes. It's as if he could smell them. Together he and Rori manage to avoid major trouble, meaning we only get into small fights and don't have to run for our lives more often than twice.

"Rori! You shouldn't dwell here any longer." That's the first words of Bann Castor Bronach when he meets with us outside a shabby looking inn at the seaside. Despite its questionable looks, Castor claims they sell the best seafood in the Coastlands. I'm not sure if this is a praise, considering the quality of the food in Ferelden inns isn't exactly high - or just an assurance we won't die of food poisoning, should we decide to eat something.

"Howe has been informed you've returned and he's been urging the banns to help him capture you and the bastard prince." Bann Castor is a young fellow not much older than I with dark hair and soft blue eyes almost as large as Rori's. His features have a feminine touch and he seems to like fancy Orlesian clothes. "I don't know why you take the risk to meet with me. My father died defending the teyrn's honour when they said he had sold Ferelden to Orlais. Howe breathes down my neck ever since." Castor is clearly uncomfortable around us. Still his behaviour towards Rori is more than just friendly. I hope the way his mabari bitch is greeted by Barkley isn't a hint on how well Castor knows Rori. The moment her hound sees the bitch, he chases her around, trying to mount her anytime she stands still long enough for him to jump her.

"Castor, you can either let yourself be pushed around by Howe and Loghain or you can fight back. We both know they will not let you keep your lands. They will mark you a traitor just like my father." She pointedly looks at his outfit, all brocade and embroidery, velvet and silk. "You accompanied him to Orlais too often. The only reason you are still alive is that they haven't yet had time to deal with you."

"Curse you, Rori Cousland, you've never been anything but trouble," Castor groans, considering his options for a moment and finds he has none. "Alright, what do you want me to do? I am no warrior, you know that."

"I need you to persuade the nobility to side with Arl Eamon and Alistair at the Landsmeet."

"Howe will skin me alive if he ever finds out!" Castor whines.

"Go to Redcliffe with all the men still loyal to you and support Eamon," Rori advices. "It's your only chance."

It's a specially sunny day so we occupy the tables and benches outside the inn. That also makes for a good escape should we get in trouble. Only Shale is hiding in the stables, glowering out of the door at the sky. It has found something as despicable as pigeons: gulls.
"Ahhh, I love seafood." Zevran rubs his hands when a huge bowl of mussels is set down in front of him. He has persuaded me to try them as well. I'm not specially fond of seafood but I've never eaten mussels and somehow I feel adventurous today. "Especially mussels. They are tasty... and they remind me of women."

I stare at the bowl full of black shells, slightly open, but the resemblance is lost to me.

"You have to make them spread open and then you get to their hot and moist core, so soft and so tasty," Zevran purrs while he pries the first mussel open and fishes the mussel from its shell with another empty shell. Instead of stuffing it into his mouth, he holds up the oval formed flesh with the slit in the middle for me to examine. "Don't tell me you can't see it? They even smell a bit like women." The elf inhales deeply, then runs the tip of his tongue along the slit. Only Zevran can make something as simple as eating mussels look completely deviant. I inch away from him as far as possible - which is not far at all unless I want to crawl onto Sten's lap.

I stare at the mussels and all I see is mussels covered with tomato sauce. I sniff at them just to give it a try but I still don't get it.

Zevran laughs as he watches me. "Alistair, my dear friend, don't tell me you've never tasted your beautiful Fereldan rose?"

"Tasted her? What do you... no, no. I don't want to know!" I hold a mussel in each of my hands so I cannot stick my fingers into my ears and the elf has a tendency to completely ignore people telling him to shut up.

"You have never sucked her pearl of pleasure?" he purrs. "Never lapped up her juices? Never pressed your nose to her folds and smelled her sweet musky scent? Shame on you!"

"What in the name of the Maker are you talking about?" I squeak, looking around for someone to rescue me but Rori is busy talking to Castor and Wynne and Leliana are grinning like cats that swallowed the pigeon. They are eavesdropping. I just know they are. And I am making a fool of myself again. So in the end they will pinch my cheeks, tell me how cute I am and leave me wondering what I have actually done.

Zevran sighs in exasperation. "Have you or have you not pleased her with your tongue?"

"Huh?" Does he mean if I kissed her?

"Alistair, my dear friend, sometimes you make me wonder how you found your way into her bed without a map."

"It's a mystery, I admit."

Chuckling, Zevran shakes his head. "Alas, my clueless friend, I'll make it easy for you: Have you licked her between her legs? Her womanhood. With your tongue."

"WHAT!?" We are not talking about this! "No! Of course not... I... Oh, Maker's Breath! This is... " I don't want to say disgusting because nothing about Rori could ever disgust me. For me she's perfect just the way she is. Still... Zevran's suggestion is just... it's... my head feels like I got an awfully high temperature. Leliana giggles uncontrollably. When I glower at her, she falls off the bench, laughing. "This is absolutely none of your business!"

Looking at the mussels now, I can totally see what the elf was referring to earlier. They look an awful lot like... I don't think I can eat these mussels anymore.
"And you dare to call yourself a gentleman when you deny your lady such a pleasure. You thoroughly disappoint me, my friend." The elf sadly shakes his head, then starts devouring his mussels. I can't even watch it, so I look around and find Barkley still chasing the mabari bitch. She is wagging her tail so she seems to like it. Barkley runs in circles around her, then stops abruptly to sniff at the bitch's rear, pressing his nose to her. And then... he licks her.

Doing this with Rori... Oh, merciful Andraste! I'm beginning to feel awfully hot in my armour. One of these days I will die of shame when all the blood of my body rushes to my head to make me blush.

"Don't you want to eat those?" Zevran asks next to me. "No? Can I have them?" He grabs my bowl of mussels. At least I will not have to worry about food poisoning.

Rori slumps down right beside me while I sit there with my eyes squeezed shut, trying to fight the images popping up in my treacherous mind. Curse that deviant elf!

I look up at Rori when she nudges me. "Aren't you hungry?" she asks, retrieving the mussels Zevran left over. She fishes a black shell from the bowl, pries it open and sticks the soft flesh into her mouth, chewing slowly. I watch her like in a dream, suppressing a groan when she licks her rosebud lips. How can she look so incredibly hot when all she's doing is eating mussels? "They are really good." She offers one to me and I allow her to feed me. I don't care much for mussels but I still let her proceed because I just love to lick the sauce off her fingertips one by one. I must look like a complete retard the way I ogle her.

The spell is broken by Castor trying to indulge me in a political conversation. I prove a complete failure. I don't know much about politics or governance. It's never been anything that I thought I would need some day. I doubt I make much of an impression - at least not a good one considering Castor's worried expression.

"He thinks I am a fool," I sigh. "Nobody thinks I can do this but they all want me to become king anyway."

"At least you cannot disappoint them," Rori points out cheerfully.

"Sometimes you are unnervingly optimistic."

"You can only surprise them in a positive way. That's not the worst thing, you know. At least they don't expect anything from you."

"Thar's not very reassuring." How can I become king when everybody thinks I am a fool?

"When my father planned to leave for Ostagar, he wanted me to rule while he was gone," Rori says. "I was terrified. He was so sure I'd make him proud."

"I'd have been terrified, too."

"I had all the reassurance I could possibly ask for but that didn't make it any easier. I've disappointed him so often already. Why should this be any different? I mean, I'm the type of person that walks in on guests gathered for dinner and announces that there have been huge rats in the kitchen."

I chuckle. That's so totally like Rori. She too often blurts out what she's thinking.

"Father never took me to Orlais. I would have managed to start a new war within five minutes. And then he handed Highever over to me. Worst, even Mother planned to leave! I swear, they did that on purpose!" she pouts.
It's good to hear I'm not the only one feeling overwhelmed by the mere thought of having to take care of more than my own life.

"Well, I never had to prove myself worthy," Rori sighs, sadness and grief creeping back into her eyes. She leans her head at my shoulder and I wrap an arm around her. "Will this ever stop hurting?" she mumbles.

"I don't know, kitten, I really don't know."

Shale is utterly delighted when the meeting with Bann Bronach is over and we move on, away from the shore. It has brought down several gulls by throwing stones at them which makes it rather proud of itself, but it faces a superiority of birds. What can one golem do against all these flying pests?

Rori says goodbye to Castor, making him promise to give her one of the mabari pups his bitch might have after her encounter with Barkley. The young bann travels to Redcliffe to meet with Eamon. We move further north, passing by Highever so closely that we can see the castle on the cliff above the city. There's anguish in Rori's eyes and silent tears streaming down her face, but she cannot stop looking at what has once been her home until we are out of sight and the forest closes around us.

As soon as we halt to set up camp, Rori kicks off her boots and grabs my hand to drag me away from the campsite. Nobody protests although that means they will have to do all the work. Rori needs some space and time to recover and her companions have gotten to know her well enough by now to call her their friend. Even Morrigan acts like a friend towards Rori. It makes it far easier to endure her presence.

We follow a narrow path deeper into the forest. It's getting darker but Rori never hesitates; her feet find the way on their own, while I stumble over every root and stone until Rori has mercy and takes my hand.

The path ends at a clearing next to a softly murmuring creek flowing downhill between rocks covered with moss. A full moon has risen, and the water glistens with silver. Fireflies dance between the trees and I almost expect a will-o'-wisp to appear between the bushes. But the only fairylike creature here tonight is Rori. She stands with her back turned towards me, hugging herself. Before I can reach out to touch her, she swirls around and flings herself at me, capturing my lips for a desperate and longing kiss. Her fingers move with swift ease as she begins to unstrap my armour impatiently. Never breaking the kiss, I tear at the laces of her leather vest and blouse beneath. Urgently, hastily, she pulls my shirt over my head, then, roaming her hands across my body, she kneels in front of me to get rid of the cuisses. She doesn't stop there, though and soon she has me standing in front of her naked.

Tilting her head back, she looks up at me with her lovely blue eyes, reflecting the moonlight, and carefully as if she had never touched me there before, she wraps her small hands around my length. Her blouse has slipped off her shoulders and, as she's still breathless from the kiss we shared, her bosom heaves oh so beautifully. She doesn't cast her eyes down when she flicks her tongue at the sensitive tip of my erection.

It's been a while ever since she first took me into her mouth and she's been eagerly practicing. I didn't object. How could I when she proved to be such an enthusiastic student?

I am far from fighting her off now when she sucks my length into the hot cavern of her mouth, her teeth scraping my skin teasingly. My fingers entangle with her hair as this blissful sensation she gives me makes my nerves tingle. It's so strong, so... mindnumbing... I completely forget to stop her and myself in time.
"Rori!" I cry out her name. She tries to get away when she realizes what is about to happen, but can't because I hold her head in place when I find my release inside her mouth.

Eyes wide, cheeks puffed she looks like a little redheaded chipmunk while she tries to decide what to do with the load I shot into her mouth. She looks so compunctiously cute, she makes me chuckle. Glowering at me, she finally swallows bravely. "BAH!" she goes and pulls a face,

Maybe I should be embarrassed - or offended that she doesn't think of what I gave her as the sweetest ambrosia. Instead she makes me laugh. She's just too adorable. "I am sorry! Really! Aww, my poor kitten." I pull her in my arms and kiss the tip of her nose while she still sulks and tries to be mad at me. "Does it really taste so awful?"

"It's slimy... and salty... and somewhat bitter," Rori complains.

"You said the same about the stew I cooked yesterday," I grin, kissing the top of her head.

She considers that for a moment, wagging her head in thought. "Maybe a load full of your seed is not that bad after all..."

"HEY! Everybody keeps complaining about my cooking skills, yet you all eat what I cook!"

"Beggars can't be choosers."

Such a brat! I whirl her around to push her face forward to the soft mossy ground, making her squeal in surprise. It's not that easy to get her out of her clothes but in the end I succeed. With one hand at the back of her neck I hold her in place. Her cute little ass is raised as I bend her over my knee. Shivering in anticipation she wiggles and snarls when I rub her buttocks teasingly. It's amazing how much this sight excites me. If anybody had ever told me I would enjoy the sensation of my palm connecting with the soft flesh of a woman's buttocks, the sound of her whimpering, the sight of her squirming... I'd have called them mad. More likely I'd not have listened but stuck my fingers into my ears and sung to myself...

Maybe... maybe the elf is not that wrong... maybe...

He could have given a more detailed description, though...

Not that I would have listened...

More likely I'd have run away and hidden somewhere.

I make her kneel in front of me, rubbing my fingers at her slit and that tiny pebble there. My fingers come away slick with her juices. I am so nervous I almost change my mind. Oh, blast it! Nothing ventured, nothing gained!

Sniffing tentatively, I give it a try and run my tongue across her folds.

"What was that?" Rori squeaks. According to Zevran she should be delighted. I am quite sure she is not. She looks over her shoulder at me in utmost confusion.

Ahhh, okay... try and error - this was an error... obviously. "Uhm... I licked you?"

"You did... what? But why?"

Because of what a lecherous elf told me about women enjoying to be pleased by a man's tongue? Blame me for even listening. "Because I was brought up by flying dogs. They do such things. Ask
For a moment Rori is simply dumbfounded. "Oh, wait, you've been talking to Zevran!"

"It's more like he's been talking to me."

"He certainly gives you strange ideas."

"Yeah? Well, who's been sucking on my... err... lamppost... only just now and has even swallowed... everything?"

She grins sheepishly, licks her lips and shrugs, blushing so beautifully. She's incredibly cute when she's bashful. "You cannot blame me for swallowing! What else should I have done with it?" She scrambles to sit next to me. And there I already had her in such a tempting and promising position. "Next time I just kiss you, mouth full and everything."

See, that's the things Zevran never talks about. They probably don't happen to him. I guess, Zevran never has conversations like that. His women always go: 'Oh, gimme more! You taste like wine and honey!'

Or he makes this all up to torture me.

Or the women just tell him what he wants to hear.

Then he obviously has never met a woman like Rori.

Hey, I'm not huffed! Really! I love her bluntness. She will never just let me do something with her she doesn't want me to do just because she thinks I expect it from her or because I could like it. Like when I once smacked her too hard, she immediately stopped me. That way I can trust her. And she can trust me. That trust is part of why I can let go and relax when making love to her no matter our lack of experience.

"Maybe I better avoid a next time, then," I chuckle.

"You don't even grant me that moment of revenge when I get to pay you back. Shame on you!"

"Well, you could allow me to please you with my mouth, too. Then we're even."

"No, ohhhhh, no, no, no." She shakes her head forcefully, making her curls bounce.

"Why not? You do it! With me."

"Oh, uhm... but that's different!"

"Really? Why?"

"Because... because... it's just different..." There's this hungry look in her eyes right next to shame and embarressment.

"Give it a try. You don't even know what it feels like. You can still say no when you don't like it."

"But... but... oh, merciful Andraste? Do I smell? I bet I do. When did I last take a bath?" Rori is a rather lissome girl, but she is not flexible enough to smell herself down there - still she gives it a try - and topples over. It's so funny I laugh myself to tears until she hits me. "Jerk!"

"You bathed this morning," I gasp, wiping the tears from my eyes.
"And then I rode and walked around all day. Ohhhhhh, I have to be awfully smelly!" Rori squeezes her knees tightly together and whimpers.

"Can't be worse than my socks," I tease, wincing when she glares piercingly at me.

"Well, would you suck at your socks?"

"Of course not!"

What a wonderful and romantic moment! Here we are, two lovers in the middle of a warm - warm considering Fereldan standards - late summer night. The full moon's silver light is shining for us, fireflies dance in the shadows. A creek murmurs nearby, a light breeze rustles the leaves of the trees. It all could be so perfect - if this wasn't Rori and I. Perfect probably doesn't exist for us. It's always a bit awkward, but certainly never becomes boring.

I could argue with her forever. I could just let her off the hook. Instead I snatch her up and dump her into the creek, ignoring her wails and threats of horrible deaths.

Water splashes around her, she kicks and struggles - and then she sits in the icy water, blinking sheepishly, while I stand at the shore and grin smuggly. Next thing my feet are pulled from under me and I fall head over heels into the water.

Sneaky little brat. But the blame is on me. I really should have seen that coming.

We splash and struggle in the shallow water until I manage to drag my giggling ginger back to the shore. She's dripping wet from head to toe now. Leaves have entangled with her hair, her body is glistening in the silvery light of the moon. She's as beautiful as a nymph. Although nymphs probably don't shiver in the cool night breeze and clatter their teeth. It's time to get her warm.

I embrace her, feeling the softness of her breasts pressed against my body. She tilts her head back to accept my kiss, starting teasingly gentle until Rori has enough of gentle and bites down on my lower lip, drawing blood. I growl in reply and push her to the ground, holding her down with my weight as I ravish her mouth. My hands roam her body, taking special care of her beautiful voluptuous bosom. Abandoning her lips, I let mine wander down her throat and breasts, across her ribs and the flat of her belly.

I still have no idea of what I am doing, when I spread her legs and make her rest them on my shoulders, but at least I know one thing for sure by now: Stimulating the tiny pebble gives her pleasure.

She stiffens once she realizes what I am about to do but her protest fades, turning into a gasp, and a shiver runs through her at the sensation of my tongue flicking against the most sensitive spot of her body.

That is a far better reaction than before, right? This is as new to me as it is to her so she has to deal with me practicing on her. It's for her own benefit, I dare say.

It's far more exciting than I had imagined. It is me who makes her moan and squirm and buck her hips when I enter her with my tongue and lap at her juices, tasting her. Inhaling her sweet and musky scent, I decide this is certainly something I'd be willing to repeat if she let me. Considering I don't have someone shoving something thick, hard and long down my throat, pleasing her with my mouth sounds a far easier job than it is for her to please me.

Alas, I am still a beginner and although I manage to excite her, there comes the point where she tugs at my hair and hisses my name, pleading me to make love to her. I've been keeping her at the edge
for too long until the tension has become unbearable for her.

She gasps when I thrust into her, meeting my rhythm with her bucking hips. Her breathing is ragged, her back arched, eyes half closed and lips slightly parted. I could forever listen to these cute mewing noises she makes while I move inside of her, until they turn into lewd moans and in the end cries of pleasure. Her release comes so forcefully, she rakes her nails down my back, marking me as hers. It hurts but the pain strangely mingels with my own blissful relief, adding to the excitement.

Afterwards we lie in the cool mossy grass, holding each other as we watch the starlit sky above. I just grin stupidly. Rori keeps breathing 'wow' repeatedly.

Boy, am I proud of myself!

And I managed without a map.

"So, are you going to let me do that again?" I ask once I feel capable of speech again.

"Now?" Rori asks hopefully.
Heading north again. There's so many refugees on the main roads trying to get to the ports and find a ship to carry them away from Ferelden, away from the Blight and the civil war. It hurts my heart to see how desperate they are, that they are driven out of their homes, forced to leave their country.

My country.

My kingdom.

Oh.

Wow.

Where did that thought come from? I shake my head as if I could get rid of it that way. But it's not only a thought. It's a feeling that comes from the heart. I already feel responsible for these people. Sure, I am a Grey Warden and to fight the darkspawn is my responsibility. But this runs deeper.

"What's wrong?" Rori asks, furrowing her brow in concern.

"Nothing."

"You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"Nothing. Really. Just a weird thought, that's all." I look around at all the people that make way so we can pass by. We're faster than most of them as we're on horseback. So many just walk. The mothers and fathers carry their little children. The old are supported by the younger. They are tired, dirty and often hungry. Some are wounded. It awfully reminds me of Lothering and the people we left back there. We didn't stay to help them, though we gave them a warning, tried to make them leave before it was too late.

"So what do you think happened to all those people we left behind in Lothering?" I ask Leliana. She has lived there, she has known many of the locals. For her it has to be even harder.

"Some of them may have found their way to Denerim. Some perhaps went to the ports and sailed to Kirkwall. Many probably died. As the Maker willed."

I am surprised at how calmly she speaks, not wavering in her faith. I believe in the Maker but I am not a religious person. It's harder for me to accept the Maker's will as Leliana does. "Don't you wish you could have stayed there? To help more people, I mean?"

"If the Blight isn't stopped, everyone will die. This is the greater good we're serving, both of us, right here."

That sounds much like Duncan. Probably many would agree. Probably as a leader you have to make such decisions. Rori decided to leave Lothering before the horde arrived. She also could have decided to defend the village as long as possible. I doubt we would have gotten away again. We probably would have died there. Still... it's decisions like that I fear.

"So it's all right to let some people die for the greater good? I... I'm not so sure about that. I felt bad leaving all those people there, all panicked and helpless." I also feel bad for riding past all the refugees on the road. It reminds me of what Goldanna said about me. How I am a high and mighty prince looking down on those below.
"You're doing what you must, Alistair," Leliana assures me. "There will be worse to come yet... you will need to steel yourself, you know this."

Worse to come. Like becoming king. Like having to make such decisions for the rest of my life. Now I am feeling panicked and helpless.

"I've never been very good at that. The steeling myself part. I find it better sometimes to just be a little weak. I'm all right with that, really."

Weakness seems something I can afford less each day. Rori and I talked about Loghain a lot, the things he does, about how he became the Hero of the River Dane, the decisions he had to make while fighting the Orlesian usurper with Maric. I don't want to become like Loghain. Never. To trade some people's lives for the lives of others, to decide who shall live and who shall die - like Loghain did in Ostagar. He condemned so many to die just because he seems to believe his path will lead to saving Ferelden. That's what Rori thinks this is about. I doubt it. Nobody can be that self-complacent!

"I don't believe you. And either way, it's not as if any of us has a choice," Leliana adds after watching me thoughtfully for a while.

"What do you mean?"

"This journey will steel you. It already has. We've seen so many deaths, so much tragedy. It has rubbed off on you, like it has on any of us. We will never be the same afterwards."

And that's why I should accept all this misery? Just like that? "There has to be something we can do to help them," I mutter.

"Slay the archdemon," Sten advices.

"Yes, right. That's the plan. But, I mean, now."

"It's only another delay."

"I know, but..." Qunari logic and human logic just aren't the same. But I feel the need to take care of my people. It's becoming more and more unbearable the longer I have to watch their misery.

I wish I was as practical as Rori. She'd find a way to help without causing a delay and then she'd probably use this to make me more popular as well. I hesitate to ask her. Somehow I feel I have to get this done myself. Somehow I need to find a way to help my people - and if it's only in a symbolic way.

"We have to set up camp soon anyway. We can offer those who need it protection, a warm meal and healing," I decide. This sounds like a very Rori-like idea to me.

Morrigan rolls her eyes. "And again we waste our resources on those who cannot survive on their own."

Just Rori would also manage to make it sound like a good idea to Morrigan as well.

How much these people need protection only becomes clearer a short way down the road where a group of men in heavy armour and with Howe's family crest on their chests have blocked the road. They rummage through the belongings of the refugees, taking away anything of value, money, jewelry, any weapons.
"Bloody thieving whoresons," Wynne mumbles, clutching her staff so tight, her knuckles turn white.

"Language!" Rori teases, making the granny mage chuckle in reply.

Other soldiers sort out the refugees, separating families when they pick people from the crowd. "Money for Ferelden's army! Recruits for Ferelden's army!" one of the soldiers shouts at the frightened and angered people. Those who don't follow willingly are beaten and dragged away by the armed guards. They are penned up inside a cage-like carriage. One slaps a mother who doesn't want to let go of her daughter so hard across the face with the back of his gauntleted hand, that she tumbles to the ground.

"What kind of army is it they need such recruits for?" Rori growls next to me, nodding at one of the carriages.

Children, too young to fight, some still toddlers, young girls and boys. There are also men and women as if to prove their story about the army true. This is all too odd, though.

"Slaves," Zevran says gloomily.

"Slavery is forbidden in Ferelden," I point out. I don't want to admit it but the elf is right. They are no warriors. What else could someone want with all these children than to sell them? It's so damn obvious, I wonder why they even make the effort to tell such a stupid lie to the families.

"Seems someone has changed the rules," the elf comments. "Bet they sell them to Tevinter. Maybe some will become Crows someday."

I draw my sword, urging my horse forward. There's an anger boiling inside of me, that makes me see red.

Nobody enslaves my people!

The guards see me coming - and my reinforcement following at my heels. They let go of the refugees and turn to meet us, their commander stepping backwards when I stop my horse right in front of him. The people are smart enough to scramble out of our way and watch the confrontation from afar.

"Leave them alone," I snarl, staring the commander down in a way that makes him flinch.

Wow.

I am tempted to look over my shoulder to see if it's Sten the man is so afraid off. The Qunari has a way to glower at people that makes them run for the hills. But nobody fears me. They just go Awww! and How cute! whenever I get angry.

"They will fight to defend Ferelden," the commander stammers, his trembling hand rests on the hilt of his sword. "Arl Howe..."

"Blasted bastards, who do you think you're fooling?"

The effect of whatever it was that has frightened the commander vanishes when a soldier points out to him one of the wanted posters nailed to trees along the road. Seems Loghain has raised the reward for me ever since Eamon began to establish me as the heir to the throne. The price on my head now is the same as on Rori's. And they call me the bastard prince. Leliana loves it. She says it's adventurous and romantic. It makes for good stories and songs.

"Who do you call a bastard?" the commander barks, raising his arm to alert his men to prepare for an
attack. That's just fine for me. Still on horseback we have the advantage despite the guards outnumbering us. "Loghain wants the Grey Wardens alive. Kill the others."

The commander hasn't even drawn his sword when one of Leliana's arrows hits him straight in the chest. I finish him with one blow, decapitating him.

Shale just starts running, stomping on everybody stupid enough to stand in its way. Even a single golem stampede is something frightful. Sten follows right behind. He's so huge and heavy, Rori has found him a stallion of a large and strong breed. The horse still is utterly relieved every time it gets rid of its rider. The Qunari and the golem leave behind a swath of destruction. Rori, Zevran and I engage those in battle who are left over by Sten and Shale, with the mages and Leliana firing their spells and arrows from the background.

The crowd picks up the soldiers' cries "The bastard prince!" - "Grey Wardens!" - "Kingslayers!" - "The last of the Couslands!"

I have no time to worry about the mass of people in my back. They could become dangerous. I know that much but I really couldn't care less at the moment. Next to me Rori tries to find a gap in the defense of a knight but he doesn't give her much of a chance, blocking her with his shield. She parries a few strikes but he's much taller and heavier than her and his blows come with such a brutal force, she's shaken by every single one. Another strike and she lets go of her sword, stumbling backwards to escape her opponent's blade. Her arm hangs limply at her side. Only Barkley's jaws snapping down on the soldier's ankle save her from getting run through.

Cursing, I swing my sword at the head of my opponent. With a loud CLONK it connects with his helmet. I don't wait for him to break down but charge sideways, ramming Rori's attacker with my shield, driving him away from her. Out of the corner of my eye I catch the sight of another man aiming at me. But I cannot bother with him right now as Rori is again forced backwards, only defending herself with her dagger.

I can sense the soldier in my back while I fight the two soldiers I have to lure away from Rori. I need to delay them for long enough to turn round and deal with the man in my back. But they won't give me no chance.

Then there's another loud CLONK and the man in front of me loses his footing when something solid hits his helmet. I whirl around to block the strike from behind just in time. Several more clonking sounds can be heard but it still takes me a while to realize its stones.

Some of the refugees throw stones at Howe's soldiers.

I turn back to defend Rori, yelling at her to retreat, but find her already being dragged away by a young elven woman about her age. Two male elves armed with clubs - obviously father and son - beat the soldiers up so furiously, they really manage to fend them off. They are joined by a young but battered knight. It's a miracle he can actually hold his sword considering the condition he's in.

His reddish hair is as greasy and dirty as his beard and his ragged clothing. His eyes have sunken in, a feverish glow speaking of the horrors he witnessed. His right leg is stiff, he keeps dragging it behind, hardly able to stay on his feet whenever he wields his sword. Whatever gives him strength, it's nothing his body provides.

"For the Couslands!" the knight roars and runs one of Howe's men right through.

"For Ferelden!" I cry and throw myself at the next Howe man. To my utter surprise the cry is answered by many throats and soon the soldiers find themselves not only battling us but the people.
An angry mob is nothing to underestimate. Howe's men quickly learn their lesson but there's none left to tell the tale. The people stomp them into the ground, then free their relatives from the cages and recollect their belongings taken from them by Howe's men.

In all this chaos I search for Rori.

I am utterly relieved to find her with her back resting against a tree at the side of the road. The blonde elven woman is tending her arm. The way Rori winces every time she is touched, Wynne better had a look at it. Father and son, both as blond as the girl, approach with the battered knight leaning heavily on them. "Lady Rori!" the young elf shouts, beaming at her brightly.

"Gavin!" I guess Rori would beam if not for her arm. Her grin looks a bit pained. "Ser Gilmore, Farrin! I thought you were all dead!"

"We weren't at the castle when Howe attacked. Father, Ophelia and I were at the alienage for a relative's wedding," Gavin explains. He's a few years older than Rori and has remarkably grey eyes. "We only found out when we returned the next morning and found... and found..." There's sadness and sorrow in his eyes - and sympathy when he looks at Rori. His father, Farrin, shakes his head and Gavin falls silent, casting his eyes down.

Ser Gilmore slumps down next to Rori. His breathing is ragged and he's sweating heavily. I recall Rori mentioned him a few times, an old childhood friend no more than two years her senior. But the last months have taken their toll and the tragedy has left Gilmore a broken man. Once he certainly was handsome, you can see it in his face, staring back at you like a ghost from the past. "I never thought I'd get to see you again," he grunts. This once proud knight reeks of neglect. He's unshaved and dirty in a way that shows he didn't care to look after himself. "Rori, I thought you were dead, too. But then Howe and Loghain began looking for you. They say you murdered King Cailan. They say the teyrn was a traitor."

"Gilmore, you don't believe that shit, do you?" Rori says forcefully.

"Language," Wynne sighs as she shoos Ophelia away to tend to Rori's arm.

"No, no, of course not." Gilmore looks at Rori as if she was an epiphany. The sorrow is still there edged into his skin, but there's hope returning to his dull eyes. He has recovered a reason to be strong for.

"How did you get away, Gilmore? What happened to my parents?" Rori takes his hand in hers, holding on to him like she has only done with me before. It's really silly but I feel a pang of jealousy stab my heart.

"There was a fight, fire everywhere, the heat was scorching," Gilmore croaks as he pulls the haunting memory back to the surface. "I knew we were lost. But we had to buy you time. I was wounded, couldn't get back to my feet and then Howe was there and ran me through." He trembles so badly, I'm afraid he's going to spasm. "When I woke I lay on a cart loaded with the corpses of my fallen comrades. I was too weak to move. All I could do was lie there and let things happen. I drifted in and out of consciousness and then Gavin and Farrin were there. They found me and rescued me. That's really all I know. If you want any details, ask the elves."

"Oh Gilmore, I'm so sorry," Rori whispers. Tears stream down her face when she hugs the sobbing knight. He clings to her as if his life depended on it.

"What happened to you, Rori? What is this all about King Cailan?" Gilmore pulls himself together with some effort.
"This is a very long story she will tell later. You both need rest," Wynne says firmly. Then she begins to take care of the miserable Ser Gilmore. "Alistair, I think, you should talk to the people."

"Huh? I should... but... why?" I stammer, turning when Wynne nods at something behind me.

There they are.

The refugees.

I thought they would move on but no! They have gathered around me and look at me expectantly. I grin foolishly at them, panic rising inside of me. "Whoa, but Wynne," I hiss. "I cannot... this is impossible... I am not..." Before I can go on protesting, I am lifted onto a nearby wagon by Shale.

Blasted golem!

There's such a hard lump in my throat I can hardly swallow. "Help!" I mouth at Rori. She gives me thumbs up and smiles reassuringly. It's not really a bright smile, more a weak and crooked one. Her cheeks are still smeared with tears.

"I believe in you," she whispers.

Oh, yeah, that makes things so very much easier. Thanks, kitten!

My heart is trying to leap out of my throat as I stand there above the assembled crowd, all eyes on me. I can hear the murmur spread through the crowd. The bastard prince. King Maric's son.

Oh, Maker's Breath!

"So, yes, that's me, a royal bastard." I shrug, smiling lopsidedly as I run my fingers through my hair.

Laughter.

"The royal bastard to be more precise. But next to being King Maric's son and - as it seems - the heir to the throne - howsoever that could have happened..."

More chuckling and laughter.

"...I am also a Grey Warden. Probably more than I am a prince. At least... I have some more practice at the Grey Warden business than I have at being a prince..."

Oh, Andraste help me, I am babbling.

"... but most of all I am Fereldan, just like you. And I cannot and will not give up my homeland. I will defend it against the darkspawn - as a prince, as a Grey Warden and as a Fereldan"

That doesn't sound convincing, does it?

"Now, you see me standing here and maybe you think, yeah, he's got a shining armour, a sharp sword and big words. But he's just a young fellow..."

"And a handsome one," a toothless granny shouts, making the crowd laugh again.

"It never hurts to hear a pretty lady say so," I reply, bowing politely to her. "Ahhh, now I have lost my chain of thought. The blame is on you, dear lady. There you can see how easily I get distracted by female beauty."
"You flatter me, son!" The granny blows me a kiss and flutters her eyelashes coquettishly at me. "You can always pay me a visit when you're done with the darkspawn." The crowd roars with laughter.

At least they find me entertaining. If king doesn't happen I can always try as a stand-up comedian.

"The darkspawn. And the archdemon. Right. That's my prompt." I pause, trying to return to earnest. "If you doubt I can end this Blight and slay the archdemon, then you are right. I cannot do this alone. Like Maric the Saviour couldn't defeat the usurper alone. But if Ferelden unites, if we all stand together and defend our country, our homes and families, then we can make this happen. Ferelden belongs to us and we will not give it up."

Silence.

Oh.

Okay.

Did I say something wrong? Something awkward...

Then a motion runs through the crowd. It starts at the very front, when Ser Gilmore kneels. Kneeling, when you got a stiff leg is nothing easily acquired. For a moment I believe he's just tired. But Rori and the elves from Highever, my companions, they all follow his example - and then like a wave, one by one the people drop down on their knees.

My jaw drops. I probably should be glad they all incline their heads so they don't see that completely retarded look on my face. I turn around and see at least Morrigan, Shale and Sten are still standing. Bless them! But then Sten, too, inclines his head and grunts his approval.

Whoa!
Whoa!
Awkward!

This is not happening.

"Errr... maybe we should all stand up again because I very much doubt we can slay any darkspawn while kneeling in the dirt..." I mumble, but in the silence my voice sounds awfully loud.

"Hail to Prince Alistair!" Ser Gilmore shouts as he rises again with the help of the elves. The crowd picks up the praise and I am greeted by their shouts, their faces turned upward, eyes shining. There's a determination there I haven't seen in them before. They have been hopeless, a battered mass of people that have lost everything but their lives. But now...

I feel dizzy.

Even more so when the people don't leave. Well, some of them do. But I see men saying goodbye to their wives and children. I see sons hugging their parents and brothers bidding farewell to their younger siblings... and I begin to feel awfully sick.

"What are they doing?" I croak, leaning against a tree for support.

"You have just recruited yourself some soldiers, your Highness," Ser Gilmore chuckles. It is a rasping sound. I very much doubt the knight will ever fully recover.
"WHAT?... NO!... They cannot... but... they were fleeing... I... they will die if they stay...."

"They stay to defend Ferelden. Just like you."

"Oh, merciful Andraste! Someone has to tell them to leave! They are peasants, craftsmen, not soldiers!"

Breathe! Breathe slowly! A hyperventilating Grey Warden and wannabe-king is not going to make a good impression.

"Do you really believe Maric defeated the Orlesian usurper only with the help of knights and soldiers? There were many ordinary people fighting for him - because they believed in him and in Ferelden." Ser Gilmore inspects the assembled men quickly and with the eye of a skilled soldier. "They can be trained. I am too... I will never fight on a battlefield again, but I still can be an instructor." His attitude has changed. It's as if he has been lost and now he found Rori and some cause to live for, he has returned from a dark and desperate place. His whole composure now is that of a knight instead of a destroyed man.

"But we cannot take them all with us!" I almost expect someone to point out how Maric hid in the wilds and mountains for years with his army, an army bigger than that bunch of refugees. I guess, it's about fifty men, maybe sixty. This is not an army. This is a suicide squad. They could be on their way to Kirkwall or wherever. They could be save. Instead I made them stay and probably condemned them to die.

"We don't have to. We have Warden's Peak. They can stay there and prepare for the battle," Rori suggests. I glare at her and she shrugs, offering an apologetic grin. Backstabbing little beast.

"Peasants and craftsmen," I hiss at her.

"Mhmmm, do you think there's also stone cutters and carpenters amongst them?" Rori asks thoughtfully. "Warden's Peak needs some repairs done."

I give up. Nobody is going to listen to me. They all think I've done incredibly well. The people love me. They want to follow me. How they got this idiotic idea is totally beyond me. I'm the only one who thinks this is a terrible mistake.

"Now you got the men, you have to make sure they stay," Ser Gilmore advices. "Paying them a wage would help. Feeding them is certainly necessary. Make sure they believe they have a future and that you are the man to lead them there."

"Lead? Who? I?" I have to sit down. Ser Gilmore arches an eyebrow quizzically at me. Maker preserve me! The only place where I can lead them is their deaths.

"What's his problem?" he asks Rori. He has obviously never met someone given power who absolutely doesn't want it. She pats my back sympathetically when I bury my face in my hands. I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders.

"Brasca! You are planning to give them the dragon gold, right?" Zevran whines.

"Don't worry, we'll find another treasure." Rori cuddles him and gives him her sweetest smile. The elf's resistance melts as quickly as an ice cube in the Hissing Wastes.

"Alright, alright, but I want to keep that fancy crown. The ladies just love it," he grumbles. "That treasure you want to find... we won't have to kill another dragon, no?"
"Rori, we cannot take them to Warden's Peak. It belongs to the Grey Wardens. They have to stay neutral." That's my last try. We're going to send these men away and tell them to stay with their families. There is no hope for them here. We are all doomed...

"Alistair," Rori says calmly as she takes both my hands in hers. She winces whenever she moves her right arm even after Wynne healed her. "You're behaving like this nutcase outside Lothering's Chantry." It's as if she dumped a bucket of icy water over me. She's right. I recall how she told this idiot to shut up, how she told him that whining wasn't going to get them anywhere. "According Warden's Peak, you recruited these men to fight the Blight. You did not once mention Loghain or how you want to become king."

"How did this happen? I didn't say anything smart at all. Nothing out of the ordinary," I breathe in exasperation.

"I don't know." Rori wraps her arms around my neck, tilting her head back to look me in the eyes. "I mean, I do know, but it's hard to explain. There's just something that makes them see you can be so much more than you are, that you have it in you to be someone great."

"But I do not want to be someone great," I sulk.

"I'm afraid you already are."

Sighing, I accept my defeat. I still have no clue how this happened. But when we reach Warden's Peak, we have about two hundred men and women following us. The number just kept increasing. My name and Rori's have turned into a rallying cry of hope. It's astonishing and frightening. I have no idea how to deal with this, no idea how to encourage the people when they come to speak to me.

Leliana says they love me. She claims I have a natural charm. A bit awkward, but that seems to be part of the Theirin heritage. At least people keep telling me over and over again how much I am like Maric.

"Alistair's more than just Maric's son." That's what Rori keeps replying when I am compared to my father. I want to throttle her whenever she does this as I am afraid people will expect me to do something grand. At the same time I know she isn't reducing me to a man who just happens to be a king's son and that's what I love her for. I just wish she'd tell me alone, preferably somewhere quiet and private.

Private has been difficult before but now with all these people it has become impossible. I feel awkward whenever Rori shows her affection openly. I'd hold back and just kiss her cheek or the back of her hand. But Rori doesn't give a damn and her boisterous nature gives me a whole lot of enormously embarrassing moments in front of a large audience. Usually when she pounces me, I blush a deep crimson when I hear people go "Awww!" or "How cute!" or they just chuckle.

Leliana says it's a good thing. The people are impressed by my character. They see a man with a heart of gold. They see something as beautiful as Rori's and my love in a time when darkness and despair reign their lives. She says it gives them hope and that some of the light we have found for ourselves also shines on them.

"But I do not want to be a larger-than-life-figure!" I sulk.

"Don't worry, you are not," Leliana chuckles. "You are far from being aloof - and that makes you even more charming."

Not all of the people who join us are going to fight. Some men have brought their families. Some
people have joined us to work as maids and servants. Levi almost has a heart attack when we emerge from the tunnels.

"Wh-what is that?" he gasps.

"An army. Or at least that's what they will be once they are trained," Rori says, rather unimpressed by Levi's shocked expression. "Can you feed them?" Levi nods, dumbfounded. "Can you house them?" Levi nods, still dumbfounded. "We have to talk about some investments I want to make," she goes on. "These people have to be paid. And I have to talk to Avernus so he doesn't get any strange ideas with all the people here."

Merciful Andraste! Avernus! I have totally forgotten about that crazy mage! And we have packed the fortress with possible test persons! I think I will have to remind Avernus that I am a templar. Well, a Grey Warden with a templar training. But the effect is the same.

Rori turns when a large sturdy man taps her shoulder. "Yes?"

"Didn't you say this was a fortress?" he grumbles, pointedly looking at the ruins of what once was indeed a proud fortress. It's not hard to see the disappointment in the faces of those who have arrived with us. They thought there would be more than just an empty keep with a merchant family and an old mage.

"Didn't you say you were a stone cutter?" Rori replies sweetly. If she feels bad about having lured the people here, then she doesn't show it. I feel bad. I feel like apologizing to every single one of them personally.

"Aye."

"Seems you got work to do."

"Aye."

After this is settled, Rori, Barkley and I climb all the way up to the highest tower where we meet with the rickety mage. All these stairs are probably the best protection for the people as long as we can't find anybody to watch Avernus.

"I promised to continue my studies within ethnically boundaries," Avernus huffs when Rori tells him the new arrivals are not meant to be used for any wicked shit. Her words, not mine. "There's hardly anything I can do. You don't even allow me the things I requested!"

"The lyrium trade is controlled by the Chantry," Rori points out to him. "But here is what we found on our journey." Several lyrium potions, some dust, too.

"Not enough! Not enough!" Avernus throws a tantrum that would make a three year old go green with envy. "You condemn my research to fail!"

Rori groans and rolls her eyes. "For someone who sat in this tower for 200 years without making much of a progress you are rather impatient. For all this time you had nobody to run your errands, no new books, nothing."

"You didn't even bring me darkspawn," the mage complains sullenly.

"Working on it," Rori assures him before we leave him alone once more. The keep is buzzing with activity. Ever since we closed the veil there has not been as much going on. Just now there's far less demons. Rori and I stand on the bridge that leads to Avernus's tower, watching the people below,
scrambling around like ants in an anthill.

"So where will we go from here?" I ask, resting my arms on the railing - after I tested if it would support my weight.

"Straight to our bedroom?" Rori suggests, nudging me to make me wrap one arm around her shoulder.

"You are such an insatiable, naughty girl! As much as I appreciate this suggestion, that's not what I meant."

"Oh, you're talking about the job? Well, next stop Orzammar."

"Do I have to act kingly in Orzammar?"

"No."

"Already loving it. When can we leave?"
Orzammar is far away. Our bedroom is closer, still we don't make it there in time. It all starts at that bridge high above the ground where the icy wind whips at us. And it all starts rather innocently with a sweet kiss. Just that kiss doesn't stay sweet and innocent and when I stumble through the door and down the stairs that lead to Sophia's office, I have a ginger clinging to me with her legs wrapped around my waist and her arms around my neck. I almost slip, only keeping my balance by thrusting Rori at the wall. She gasps and bites down on my lower lip in reply.

Oh, merciful Andraste!

My shield clatters to the ground, then my sword. Rori’s sword and dagger follow. Then the two knives she hides in her boots. And the daggers she has strapped to her thighs. We burst through the door into Sophia's office and I manage to wipe everything off the desk before slamming Rori down on it.

Cursing under her breath, she tears at the straps of my armour, while I trail kisses down the side of her neck and pull the ties of her blouse open.

Someone clears his throat.

Looking up I find Zevran and the elven maid from Highever, in an equally compromising position. She's clutching the mantelpiece for support, her skirts lifted high above her waist and the Antivan elf is somewhat connected with her from behind.

Huh?

Either the anatomy of elven women is slightly different or he doesn't have his... you know what I mean... where it is supposed to be...

Andraste's flaming sword!

This is totally the wrong... entrance.

Actually until now I have thought of this part of the body as an exit solely.

Doesn't that hurt? This has to hurt.

"Oh, see who we got there: Roristair," Zevran purrs, not concerned at all by our presence or the situation we find him in. If I was caught doing something like that to Rori, I'd die of shame. Not that I ever would do anything like that to her!

"Pardon?" What in the name of the Maker is he talking about?

"That's what Leliana calls you. You are so inseperable, we mostly talk about Rori and Alistair so she came up with making things a bit easier for us - and shorter."

"Errr..." I am still bent over Rori who is lying on the desk with her head tilted back. She gets to see the whole scene upside down. I doubt that makes it any less disturbing.

"So, do you want to watch? I don't mind some audience if I get to watch you in return..." The elf bucks his hips, making the elven woman moan in reply. She hasn't said a word yet - only once whimpered - and her face is hidden behind a curtain of blonde hair. I doubt she thinks this is funny.
"No, no, we do not want to watch!" Rori squeaks. "What do you... oh, merciful Andraste! ... How did you manage to stick it in there?"

Why, oh, why does she have to ask such questions?

"I admit, it requires a whole lot of lubrication," the elf chuckles, moving his hips in a rather explicit demonstration of something I never wanted to know was possible. I am so shocked, I can't even shut my eyes. Do you know that? When something is so gross it becomes somewhat fascinating in a very... gross way? And you wish you could look away but you can't. "Otherwise it would be rather painful and unpleasant. Do you want to give it a try? I still got some grease left..."

"NOOOOOOOO!" Rori and I cry in unison.

"You both are so boring," the elf sighs. "I assume, you don't want to join us? No? Well, then get out of here. I've been here first and I'm not done yet. Come back later or find yourself another room."

We decide for another room.

Rori's room to be more precise.

She grabs me by the front of my shirt and pulls me in, her lips on mine in a feverish kiss. I slam the door shut behind us and Rori against it, her back pressed against the wood, her busty front against my chest. She slips her hand in between us and cups my length, squeezing it through the fabric of my pants. I groan and bite down on her lower lip in reply.

That's when someone clears his throat.

Bloody blast it! What the fuck is wrong today?

We jump apart and turn to find Ser Gilmore sitting on Rori's bed. He has washed and shaved and got a haircut, or in short: his looks have entirely improved within the last few hours. He's still skinny and that haunted look in his eyes hasn't faded. He looks as flushed as Rori and I do, embarrassed to the point where he can hardly speak at all.

"Gilmore!" Rori exclaims, nervously tucking a lose strand behind her ear. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to have a word with you... but now I think I'd rather talk to Prince Alistair," the knight says coolly, his hollow glare piercing into me. His composed demeanor is betrayed by the bright red spots on his cheeks.

"What? Now?" I groan.

"Yes. Now. Alone."

"Err... I'll be right outside," Rori mumbles, shifting out of my embrace, she reaches for the doorknob.

"I'd rearrange my clothing if I were you, Lady Cousland," Gilmore comments, causing Rori to hurriedly lace her blouse for the second time this afternoon.

The moment the door closes behind her, Gilmore struggles to his feet and shoves me. "HEY! What in the name of the Maker is wrong with you?" I snap.

"She is a noble woman not some slut you picked up at a random street corner," Ser Gilmore hisses,
coming to stand face to face with me. "She has no experience at all, she's young and naive and so full of hopes and dreams. Her parents are dead, her brother isn't here, but I am here. I have sworn to protect the Couslands and I demand to know of your intentions!"

Whoa!

Now that is somewhat... unexpected. My intentions. I don't even know if I have any. Protect Rori, I guess, live as much of a life as possible before it ends and - if there's a chance - survive the Blight. Afterwards I can think of more.

I briefly wonder if I should be offended. He's after all accusing me of taking advantage of Rori. But he wants to protect her and that's something we can agree upon.

"I intent to keep her alive and make her happy. For the time being that has to be enough. After the Blight - if we survive - I... I haven't really thought about it yet. But if you're asking me if I was ready for a commitment - with her... I think, I feel... the answer is yes." Of course it is. I love her. She's more than I ever dared to dream of.

"Don't you make empty promises, Prince, because I'll be coming back for you if you do!" Thus said, Gilmore pushes past me, allowing Rori back in as he leaves.

"What did he want?" she inquires curiously.

"He wanted to save the damsel in distress," I say sullenly.

"He wanted to save the damsel in distress," I say sullenly.

"Me?" Rori wonders.

"No, me, of course. He warned me of you being a maneater."

"I am no maneater!" Rori declares in high dudgeon. Awww, she's so cute when she sulks. I laugh and she throws one of her boots at me. "Jerk! Now do you want to have a third try or has Gilmore scared you away?"

As a reply I lock the door. And to make sure absolutely nobody can disturb us or walk in on us I even push a dresser in front of it. And I close the curtains. Rori sits on the bed with her legs crossed and watches me with growing amusement when I check the wardrobe for any unwelcomed intruders.

"What do you expect to find in there?" she teases.

"A secret tunnel that will be discovered by one of our companions the very moment we start taking off our clothes," I growl.

The wardrobe is empty. But I find Barkley under the bed. That means I have to push the dresser aside again, unlock the door and throw the dog out. Just to throw a 200 pound war hound out of the room when the hound doesn't want to leave and ignores his mistress' commands is not an easy thing to do. In the end Rori bribes him with cookies.

When Rori and I slam the door shut in the sulking dog's face, we are finally alone. I take her face in my hands and make her look at me. Her large blue eyes are round and shining with love and desire. "I love you," I murmur as I lean in to kiss her.

"Love you, too," she breathlessly whispers against my lips.

I push her toward the bed while I kiss her, my trembling fingers are once more trying to get her out
of that blouse - this time with success! And if nobody sets the blasted fortress on fire or summons a
demon army I should finally get to where I've wanted to be for the last hour.

I shove her onto the mattress, kneeling between her legs to pull off her tight leather pants. Her legs
are long - well, as long as they can get with a girl only about 5ft3in high - and slender with the cutest
little freckles on her knees. I take hold of her delicate ankle, causing her to stiffen as she's suspecting
me to tickle her. It's tempting, but I got nothing like that on my mind. Still she only relaxes when I
have trailed my kisses up her calf. Her breathing becomes ragged when I move my mouth across the
soft skin of her inner thigh. She stiffens again and begins to squirm when I get closer to her center. I
hold her down with my hand on her belly and press my face to her sweet folds, inhaling her scent.

"Alistair!" she whimpers, trying to get away from me and squeeze her legs shut. "I've not had a bath
for... for... ow, just don't do that!"

Not that again! I love her scent. I love to kiss her there. I love the way she presses herself against my
face and the way she tastes. And I know I can make her enjoy this. She just won't let me do it. Not
unless she takes a bath before and as much as I love bathing with her - sometimes a man just wants to
proceed with what he has on his mind.


She gasps and makes a strangled noise and for a moment she resists.

"Don't make me repeat myself," My voice doesn't sound like my own. It's somewhat hoarse and
deeper, more like a growl. Somewhat... manly. Boy, I sound manly! That's sexy, right?

At least it has an immediate effect as Rori whimpers lowly but obeys. I pull her closer, lifting her ass
off the bed, with her back still on the mattress and her legs resting on my shoulders.

I look up at her to find her face blushed with shame, tears welling up in her eyes when I teasingly run
my tongue across her slit. She's so utterly embarrassed and so adorably sexy in her humiliation.
Maker! What am I doing? "Rori? You want me to stop?" I murmur against that tiny hard pebble,
making her moan in reply as she shakes her head. Her fingers entangle with my hair when I start to
suck at her. She's still flushed, shaking with embarrassment. But soon afterwards she clutches the
bedcloth, moaning my name. Maker, I cannot believe how much this turns me on. My kitten is
completely at my mercy and I have her mewing only for me. It's so damn arousing. She cums in my
face, her passionate cry muffled by a sob of humiliation.

I don't give her no time to recover. While her body is still trembling with delicious pleasure, I pull
down my pants and mount her. She cries out in both lust and pain when I thrust into her forcefully.
Her inner walls still spasm from her orgasm, clenching tightly around me.

"Oh Maker... Rori!" I groan at the sensation of this increased friction. I bend down to kiss her,
pushing deeper into her at the same time. She returns the kiss feverishly, her nails digging into my
back as she meets my rhythm with her bucking hips. It's much more than I can endure any longer.
The tension grows tighter and tighter with every stroke until it all but explodes inside of me. "Fuck!"
I see stars when I collapse on top of my woman and there's a very, very silly grin plastered all across
my face.

"Language!" Rori gasps beneath me.

"What?" I start laughing and when she joins in, she clutches around my length in such an
excruciatingly thrilling way, I can feel myself growing hard again.
"Oh Rori, what are you doing to me?" I groan, tenderly brushing her damp hair from her forehead.

"Me? I did absolutely nothing to you. You did a whole lot of things to me, though!" she protests, punching my shoulder with her small fist. "What did you think you were doing?"

"Ow! Hey! You recall, I bruise easily!" I catch her hand before she can hit me again. "Actually I didn't think at all..."

"You ordered me around!" Rori bristles as she tries to pull free from my hold on her wrist.

The grin falls from my face, leaving it blank with fear. I let go of her and scramble away, sitting at the edge of the bed. "Oh... you... you didn't like it?" I croak. My heart constricts so painfully, I feel like crying. Maker, what did I do? I... she was sobbing earlier. Why did I make her go through this when she... Oh, merciful Andraste, help me! "Maker! Did I hurt you? Oh, Rori, please, tell me I didn't hurt you!"

"No...," she says in a very, very small voice. Hiding behind her pillow she only peeks over the rim with wide eyes. "I loved it." It's no more but a whisper but with mystification about her own confession.

I blink at her, thoroughly confused now. "You... loved... it?"

She nods shyly.

"Andraste's flaming sword, Rori! You... I thought I hurt you!"

"No, no, you did not... I... first I did not want to... but at the same time I did so enjoy what you did to me... I... it was so confusing... and hot... and my first instinct was to talk back but..." She kneads her hands together in exasperation, displaying a cutely crooked and insecurely sheepish grin. "I mean... that's somewhat strange, isn't it? Getting ordered around, getting spanked, allowing someone to do things to you that you do not really want to be done to you..." She sighs and pulls the pillow over her head as she slumps down to the mattress. "I'm scared... intimidated... by myself and the things we do," a muffled voice comes from under the pillow.

"Maker, Rori!" I groan and let myself fall backwards onto the mattress, hiding my face in my hands. "Don't you ever do that to me again!"

"Sorry." Pause. "I've been a rather bad girl, haven't I?"

"Certainly very bad," I mumble.

"Hmm... do you think I deserve some spanking?"

With my hands still covering my face, I spread my fingers to look at her through one of the gaps. She sits there, clutching the pillow to her chest, her bright red curls a chaotic mess. She bites her lower lip as she gazes hungrily at me with her large blue eyes. "You know, kitten, sometimes you scare me, too."

The Bannorn is the breadbasket of Ferelden. We ride past corn fields and orchards, meadows with cattle and occasionally sheep. Flat, rank lands with little cottages in pretty villages with well fed people living there. Unless of course there's a Blight. Then the roads are cramped with refugees and the people have large hungry and frightened eyes.
We only encounter few smaller darkspawn groups which is a good sign as it means the horde still lingers in the south probably around Ostagar. Rori and I have seen the archdemon in our dreams occasionnally but the frequency hasn't increased yet. As we are both clueless - something Rori keeps cursing Duncan for - all we can do is assume this means there's not going to be a large battle anytime soon. Avernus isn't very helpful. He's only interested in his research and although he provides some answers, he won't leave his work to look things up in the library for us. And he doesn't dream.

"It has become very close with the other Grey Warden." The sound of the rumbling voice startles me. I look up from my observation of Rori's bouncing breasts - I just love when she's on horseback - to find Shale walking beside me.

"Uh...yes, I suppose I have at that," I answer suspiciously. After all the teasing and jokes, the incidents with golem control rods and mussels, I am quite paranoid about anybody talking to me about my relationship with Rori.

"I find this difficult to comprehend. It is whiny and weak and constantly laughing."

Charming.

People constantly keep telling me how weak, whiny and stupid I am. I should have advised Eamon to first talk to Morrigan, Sten and Shale before he got that king-thing started. That could have changed his mind and saved me a lot of trouble. "Then I guess a romance between you and I is completely out of the question?" I can hear Rori giggle. That sound makes me smile.

"And the attempts at humor. I cannot understand how it is endured," the golem groans. I bet it has heard Rori's outburst of amusement as well.

"Well maybe you should ask her why she likes me so much instead of bothering me with it." We both would benefit from this. The golem wouldn't have to endure my presence anymore and I'd get rid of it at the same time. Problem solved.

Shale grumbles and glares at me. "It has a loud mouth. Why its head has not been crushed already is hard to imagine."

For a statue it sounds astonishingly sullen and - jealous. Actually it reminds me a bit of Barkley when he refuses to leave Rori's bed and make room for me. Or when he squeezes himself in between us to gain her attention. Or when he chews on my boots after spending a night outside the tent because I so cannot stand being watched by the dog when making love to Rori. Plus the tent isn't big enough for two adults and a 200 pound war hound when they do more than just lie there. Uhm... I mean the adults doing more than just lying there. The dog is never, never, never part of any exercises that may happen in that tent.

"Or maybe you just happen to figure she likes me a lot more than she likes you." I grin smuggly at the enervating statue.

"Don't be foolish," Shale snorts.

Haha! Gotcha! "Yes, I thought so. Just watch your step or I'm totally telling."

"I'm going to walk over here now."

I am about to send it on its way with another smug retort when a tingling in the back of my head alarms me. "Darkspawn!" Rori and I cry in unison. Next Rori pulls her horse around and storms off into the direction of the darkspawn.
"Brasca!" Zevran's at Rori's heels before I have even managed to turn my horse around.

"Hey! Do you want to fight all that darkspawn alone?" I call after her. Barkley whines next to me. "Of course we're going after her." The dog barks his approval. "You know, sometimes I think I should get a leash for her." Barkley wags his tail approvingly.

"Unwise," Sten comments.

"Rori, don't you ride that fast!" Wynne scolds. I really have to ask her if she has children and grandchildren. She sounds much like a parent. Yesterday she admonished me to brush my teeth three times a day. And then she wanted to make sure my ears were clean. "You are going to fall off your horse... Don't you jump over that... FENCE!... oh, merciful Andraste! One day that girl will give me a heartattack!"

Rori and Zevran are the first to reach the refugees under attack. Some of the people have hidden under their wagons and carts. Not that this will do them any good. Some try to run. Not that this will do them any good either.

Rori just rides over a hurlock chasing a pale blonde woman with a baby pressed to her chest. The hooves of her horse stomp the hurlock into the ground but she doesn't stop there and charges the emissary with a loud battle cry. Leliana's arrow hits the emissary before Rori can reach it. The darkspawn's spell is disturbed and instead of making Rori's head explode, the fireball hits her horse straight in the chest. The poor creature breaks down with an earpiercing scream and Rori is thrown off. She somersaults and lands on her feet just like a cat - a sozzled cat since she falls on her butt only a second later. It saves her from having a hurlock stab her.

That girl has more luck than she has common sense.

I take care of the hurlock and Rori finally gets to the emissary. Meanwhile Shale is wrestling an ogre. That's a sight that makes me stop and stare for a moment. They have hugged each other around the waists, the ogre trying to lift Shale off the ground to throw it at a group of refugees. But the golem smashes its head at its opponents face, turning its nose into a pulp of bones, flesh and ichor. Grunting the ogre losens its grip and Shale uses its own motion and slams the ogre down with a back body drop. Then an elbow drop follows that makes the earth around us shake.

A group of rather short genlocks is chased by a roaring Sten. It looks rather funny how they all run around a carriage in circles trying to get away from the Qunari until Sten turns on his heels and surprises the startled genlocks that suddenly find themselves running into the danger they have been running from.

Rori and Zevran have engage some more darkspawn in what looks more like a dance than fighting. They strike precisely and with a light-footed grace. I have always admired the deathly beauty of their way of fighting. I stick to my shield and sword, using both to make sure as few as possible get even close enough to Rori to strike at her.

A snarling hurlock proves to be a tougher opponent than I have thought and soon I am losing ground, retreating to avoid its huge hammer. I know it's going to break either my arm or shield or both if I blocked its strikes, so I try to keep out of its way, waiting for an opening to attack. It comes when the hurlock suddenly wails in pain, turning in wild circles as it tries to shake the mabari off that has closed his jaws on its hindquarters.

Good dog.

Once the darkspawn is dead, Wynne and Leliana begin helping the injured refugees while Shale and
I pile up the darkspawn to burn them as not to have their rotting bodies corrupt the ground. Rori is holding a baby while Wynne tends the mother's wounded leg. She holds the little bundle to her chest, smiling down at it with a dreamy look on her face, then she carefully sniffs the head of the baby. The mother looks oddly familiar - that pale blond curly hair, the hazel eyes, something about her mouth...

"Thank you. Without you we would have died," the woman says with a shaking voice when Leliana hands her a cup of water.

"Don't thank me, thank Prince Alistair," Leliana answers with a smile. That blasted bard! She always has to point that out.

"Prince Alistair? Oh... I... thank you, your Highness!"

Great. Now everybody is kneeling and I feel like a complete idiot.

"No, please, don't. That's really not necessary..." I groan in exasperation. "Is there anything else we can do for you?" I address the oddly familiar blonde woman just to drag her and everybody else's attention away from me being a prince.

The poor woman is visibly shocked by me actually talking to her. "Yes. No... I shouldn't bother your Highness with my problems..."

"Please do so," I reassure her.

"You wouldn't be the first and won't be the last," Morrigan comments, passing by with a pot in her hand as she deals hot soup to the refugees. The way she scowls she'd rather deal them hot poison.

"Don't listen to her. What is it you wanted to ask?" I put on my most pleasant smile. I really don't want these people to think of me like someone aloof. Behind the woman Leliana is grinning like the cat that swallowed the pigeon. I cannot get rid of the impression she is rather pleased with me.

Reassured the woman decides she at least can give it a try. "I was wondering if you will pass by Kinloch Hold. I have a brother there. He's a templar."

"We indeed are headed this direction. You want us to deliver a message?"

"Your Highness is too kind. Yes, please tell him his family is save and sound... his name is Cullen."

"Cullen?" Now that she mentions him I can totally see the family resemblance. "We've met him recently."

"Oh, is he alright? He hardly ever writes and when he does, it's two sentences. I haven't heard from him in ages."

"Uhm... err... he's alright..." I begin to squirm. As far as I know Cullen is everything but alright. The poor man has watched his comrades being slaughtered by blood mages and demons. Then he got imprisoned and tortured in order to break his mind. When we first met him he was stuck in a magical prison and couldn't tell the difference between reality and illusion. What happened at the tower haunt him for the rest of his life.

Unfortunately his sister is a rather good observer. "There's something you're not telling me. What is with Cullen?"

I squirm some more, but she seems to have forgotten she's talking to a prince, because she's piercing me with the same glare Cullen used on Rori, when she recruited Jowan. "There was an incident at
the tower. Some bloodmages started a rebellion, demons, abominations included. But Cullen is okay. He... didn't get hurt... physically."

She has to digest this. She is not as shocked, though, as I would have imagined. "But?" she finally inquires.

"Well, he's a bit upset." I admit. "Very upset." That's quite an understatement. But I am not the one to talk to her about the horror her brother has gone through.

She looks me in the eye but I squeeze my mouth shut and look away. "Well, I guess that is all the information I will get, right? More than from Cullen himself, that is for sure. Just tell him Mia - that's me - and the rest of the family are alright and that we think of him."

While I talk to the mother, Rori keeps cooing at the child. Sten appears with his grim expression and stares down at the bundle in her arms. Alarmed Mia stretches her arms out to take her baby back but suddenly the huge Qunari bents over the baby, covers his eyes with his hands and goes: "Where is the baby?" Uncovering his eyes again he rumbles: "There is the baby!" The infant squeaks in delight and Sten repeats his "Where is the baby? There is the baby!" until Leliana passes by and whispers: "Big softie!"

He glowers at all of us with a death glare but nobody is really impressed. "You're so cute!" Rori giggles. Haha! At least i am not the only man anymore to be called cute.

Shale approaches to stare at the baby as well. "It is tiny and soft and it stinks and spits. I do not see why everybody gets so excited about it."

Mia quickly takes her baby away from Rori, causing her to look quite disappointed. "You know, we had a golem just like that in Honnleath..."

"I remember it," Shale growls. "It sat in my shadow in summer with its brothers and played chess."

Mia looks as if she is about to faint. "It talks! It... what is it doing here?"

"I could ask it the same question but I am so not interested," Shale replies.

"It watched us? All the time it watched us?" Mia squeaks.

"Creepy, isn't it?" I agree.

"There was nothing else to do. I am glad it is over. It was a boring little village with boring little villagers. And pigeons. Blasted horrendous beasts." The golem stops, lost in thought for a moment. "It had a brother that used to chase the pigeons away with a wooden sword."

"That was Cullen," Mia gasps. "He always pretended he was a templar and the pigeons were demons or abominations."

That's what one can call devotion.

See, men like Cullen should become templars, not men like me. I'd have been a real bad templar. I already had trouble not to talk to the mages. I think it's quite awkward when you travel with a group of people and nobody says a single word. The mages didn't talk, the templars didn't talk. Such moments always have me itch to break the silence. Whenever we were allowed near mages during our training, I had the whole group laugh within five minutes. My commander had me clean the latrines for a week every time.
I also bet Cullen never kneaded little figures from the soft wax of the candle templars sit in front of to recite the Chant of Light. I did. It was a way not to fall asleep. But the Revered Mother didn't think it was funny when I made a wax figure that had a striking resemblance with her. I also once accidentally set the curtains on fire when wielding the candle like a sword. Again the Revered Mother didn't think this was funny.

Boy, am I glad that we don't have to do such things as Grey Wardens. Just drink a cup of poison and you're in. It sounds so easy compared to what the templars have to endure.
Like a skeleton finger the tower rises from the thick mist that covers Lake Calenhad. It's so awfully creepy, it makes me shudder. Thinking back to the events of not that long ago, I feel utterly sorry for anybody who has to live inside these thick walls that have absorbed so much despair.

Did I mention how glad I am that I am not a templar?

They are as much locked away as the mages. The atmosphere of the circle effects them as well, and I only can think of these men and women, who have given up their lives willingly to serve the order, with admiration. At the same time I have great sympathy for those who have been forced into that life.

"I take it we are here to see the mages?" Shale comments as soon as we approach the shore of Lake Calenhad. "Lovely."

"I never thought we'd have anything in common, Shale," I laugh as I wrap my cloak tighter around me. The moist cold of this autumn day and the biting of the wind make me feel chilly.

"What would I have in common with it? It is just a whiny, weak and soft creature," the golem grumbles. It of course does not freeze and the attempts of us flesh creatures to keep ourselves warm with more clothing is looked upon by the golem with an air of superiority.

"Mages. They just love me. The sentiment is mutual."

"So it is not fond of mages. It is smarter than I assumed. Or it just has a primal instinct of self preservation like any low life form."

"I am beginning to suspect you have some kind of inferiority complex that you try to hide by constantly pointing out your superiority." There. The walking statue is not the only one to know big words.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Yes, I thought so." I grin smugly.

We have by now reached the landing stage. When the ferryman sees us coming, he jumps into his boat and tries to get away as quickly as possible. "This," he calls from a save distance, pointing at Shale, "is not going to get anywhere close to my boat!"

"But you're going to give a ferry ride to Alistair and me, right?" Rori asks sweetly. "It's a bit cold for swimming."

"I could just walk along the lake bottom to reach the tower. It, however, could not," Shale comments, looking pointedly at me. The superciliousness of this creature is incredible! I'd never have thought a golem could be so snobbish.

We leave Shale standing at the shore as we climb into the careening boat. The moment the ferryman pushes the boat off the landing stage, the mist closes around us. It's as thick as a wall and I hardly can make out Rori in the grey vapor. She shivers, pulling her cloak tighter around herself. The fog soaks our clothes and soon I can hear her teeth clattering. I start shifting my cloak off my shoulders to give it to her, but she stops me and instead leans against me so that I can wrap it around both of us. Her hair tickles the side of my neck and makes me smile. I inhale that fresh scent of verbena that is Rori's
and once more I am astonished at how lucky a man I am.

Rori has been strangely silent the last few days. Moody, too, easily upset to a point where she starts crying without any real reason. Actually ever since we saved the villagers from the darkspawn. I am glad that we saved Cullen's family. The man deserves some good news for once.

Gregoir greets us when we arrive at the tower. There's no landing stage there but a cave at the bottom of the tower. The ferryman rows the boat into the gaping opening like into a huge monster's mouth. I can't even imagine how terrified young mages have to be when they are brought in here, most of them still children. I do hope that Eamon will accompany Connor here and not let the templars collect him. I feel utterly sorry for the boy. He's the same age I was when I was sent away. It was a different reason but still I had to leave what I called home and had to live in a place despised. This tower is not a home for a child. At least not for one like Connor who had a home and parents who love him. Now I even feel sorry for Isolde.

"Let's just talk to Cullen. I don't want to stay here any longer than necessary," I whisper to Rori when I help her out of the boat.

"My sentiments exactly," she replies, a fake smile for Greagoir on her face. It's not as if she doesn't like him. Greagoir is a good man. Rori knows that and so do I. We talked a lot about the templars ever since we've last been here and I've tried to make her see the templars' point of view. Her summary: "This is all totally fucked up!" Wynne threatened to wash her mouth with a piece of soap if she kept using such offensive language, but I think Rori quite got it to a nutshell.

"Your Highness, Lady Cousland," Greagoir greets us. He doesn't look happy at all to see us. "I didn't expect you to return so soon. Are you here for Jowan?"

"No, we are here for Cullen," Rori replies. She's still freezing the way she wraps her arms around herself and although she shakes her head, I give her my cloak in addition. It's far too big for her, making her look even younger than she is. She smiles her thank you at me, that small gesture making me feel fuzzily warm inside.

"Cullen?" Greagoir croaks, pure blank horror on his face.

"Are you okay?" Rori asks with concern. "Is something wrong with Cullen?"

"No, he's fine... I think. What do you want of him?" Cold sweat appears on Greagoir's brow and the way he scowls at us I expect him to shove us both back into the boat and forbid the ferryman to ever give us a ride again. Rori and I exchange a look of pure puzzlement. She shrugs and so do I. I have no clue why Greagoir is behaving so strangely.

"We have a message for him from his family," Rori explains, slowly inching away from the Knight-Commander.

"A message?" Greagoir gasps, relief making his voice shaky. "I hope it's a good one. I doubt Cullen can cope with any more." Then he glowers at us suspiciously. "And that's all? There's nothing else you want from him?"

"Huh? What should we want from Cullen?"

"Merciful Andraste," Greagoir sighs, now utterly relieved.

"Are you alright, Knight-Commander?"

"Haha, for a moment I thought you have come to recruit him," Greagoir roars with laughter. It
sounds a bit tense and stops dead when Rori sweetly says: "Don't give me any ideas." I step on her foot. This is neither the right time nor the right place for teasing.

"Don't you dare!" Greagoir growls, arms crossed in front of his chest. He has given us Jowan but he is ready to butt heads with Rori about Cullen. Of course she has no intentions to recruit the templar from Honnleath. Cullen so wants to be a templar, it would be cruel to force him to live a life he doesn't want to live. "Cullen is a good man. I will not lose him to the Grey Wardens and see him wasted to an order that mostly consists of criminals and hopeless failures."

"Well, thank you very much," I comment icily, straightening myself. I am a Grey Warden and I am proud of what I am. And Duncan was one of the most noble and respectable men I have ever met. He gave his life to defend Ferelden! "The hopeless failures would like to talk to Cullen now, if you don't mind, Knight-Commander."

Greagoir stares at me and winces. "Your Highness... I didn't mean..."

"I think we're 'criminals' considering Loghain has marked us kingslayers and traitors," Rori corrects me by mercilessly interrupting the squirming Knight-Commander. She's not happy about Greagoir's outburst either. Part of me knows it's just stress on the Knight-Commander's side. And he's protective over Cullen as one of his templars. That's just what a good Knight-Commander would do. Still... Nobody has ever had a single word of thanks or respect for Duncan. Nobody has ever acknowledged his sacrifice.

"Then we indeed not only meet all requirements but excel them by being both criminals and hopeless failures!" Yes, I'm rubbing it in now.

"Your Highness... I am utterly sorry..."

The splashing sound of water crashing at the shore makes us all turn. It's more than just a wave, it's something huge rising from the lake, making the water stir. Greagoir lets out a cry of alarm when the golem scrambles to the shore, shakes itself like a wet dog and then stomps toward us.

"Shale!" Rori cries, her hand coming to a rest on Greagoir's arm to stop him from charging. I begin to feel sorry for the Knight-Commander. "What are you doing here?"

"That thing belongs to you?" Greagoir bellows, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

"It's name is Shale and it belongs to itself," Rori says firmly. If Shale could purr, it would. If it had a tail, it would wag it. Out of all the annoying flesh creatures Rori for sure is its favourite.

"I wanted to go for a walk. But there were gulls everywhere. It was safer to take a walk in the lake," Shale explains, completely unbothered by the suspicious templars.

"You know that all the waste from the tower is dropped into the lake, don't you?" Sometimes revenge is so sweet it's almost sticky. And that look on Shale's face is just priceless.

"I think I am going to be sick..." it mumbles. Oh, golem vomit. Now that should be interesting! "So this is where the mages live. Interesting. They should keep all flesh creatures in confinement, not just the mages."

"Yeah? And who would 'they' be?" I ask pleasantly.

"Don't be a smartass," the golem snorts.

Greagoir sighs, rubbing his temples tiredly. We give him a major headache, that much is sure. I
decide it's time for a peace treaty. We cannot stand here and argue forever about some silly remark the Knight-Commander by now regrets. "Listen, I am sorry we're causing any inconveniences," I begin. "We're all stressed in times like this, so how about we forget about our little argument and just return to business?"

"I didn't mean to disrespect the Grey Wardens," Greagoir assures me.

"No offense taken, Knight-Commander. We apologize if we gave the impression of hostility towards your order."

Greagoir's watery eyes scrutinize me for what seems an eternity. They size me up in a way that makes me sweat. Finally he nods and inclines his head. Why in the name of the Maker people keep inclining their heads is totally beyond me. I'm not king yet. I've done nothing great at all. There's nothing out of the ordinary about me. Well, Morrigan would say I'm an extraordinary moron. And Leliana would add in some places that seems the prior requirement for becoming king. I hope in Ferelden it is not. Otherwise I'd have to be really worried.

We find Cullen in his quarters where he sits in front of a chess board, playing a game with himself. The dead templars have not yet been replaced, so he has the room he usually shares three of his comrades for himself. Standing at the door and seeing those empty beds, I feel a pang of sympathy for him. Cullen knew these men. They were his brothers in arms, his friends. I know how he has to feel by my own experience. One moment they are there, laughing, jesting, fighting together. The next moment they are gone - and you probably didn't even get the chance to say goodbye.

The young templar is so absorbed in his game, he does neither react to the knock on the door nor notice our entrance until Rori softly calls his name. "Cullen?"

He's so startled, he jumps off his chair, knocking it and his chess board over. His eyes narrow at Rori when he recognizes her. "What do you want here?" he snaps, his harsh greeting causing Rori to wince.

"I...," she stammers, retreating one step when he glowers at her menacingly.

"Coming here to recruit any more blood mages for your so called order?" he sneers.

"Ouch!" Rori stays close to the door. It's certainly safer there. "Look, I am sorry. I understand you didn't like me recruiting Jowan..."

"You understand? Really? You very much gave the impression you understand nothing at all. You just showed up and asked us to hand over a dangerous murderer. You mulcted those he had slaughtered of justice. You know nothing about what it is like to be a templar, what we do to keep the people save. You're just a stuck-up noble brat who has been fed with a silver spoon all of her life."

With his fists clenched at his sides he takes one step closer with every word pressed through angrily clenched teeth until he's towering over her. He comes upon her like a hurricane of rightful fury. Rori is so taken aback, she retreats until she's cornered with her back against the wall. She's so small compared to the broad shouldered templar. Rori bites her lips to stop them from trembling without much success. Tears well up in her eyes when Cullen mercilessly continues to bash her. "Why are you crying now? Not used to someone giving you their opinion, mylady?" Cullen growls. "You have no idea how it feels like to watch your friends being murdered right in front of your eyes. You have no idea what foul magic can do to your mind. So keep your apologies, lady, they do mean nothing to me."
Thus said he turns on his heels and stiffly marches back to the table, kneeling down to carefully pick up his chess board and chess pieces. His hands are trembling, but I cannot tell if it's his uncontrolled rage or his grief.

His unexpected outburst leaves me as dumbstruck as Rori. Also I just cannot make myself snap at him when I feel he's broken inside. As much as I hated to be a templar, as much as I would have been the worst templar ever, I still feel sympathy for them and respect for their work. I'm not going to say, Cullen's right. But he's not altogether wrong either.

"Kitten..." I reach out for Rori the very moment she steps forward. Cullen shifts his weight as he senses her closing the distance between them, but he stays with his back turned to her, his muscles tense.

"Your sister asked us to tell you she and the rest of your family are save and sound," Rori says in a choked voice. "Honnleath got overrun by darkspawn but they made it out in time." She pulls the letter from one of the satchels at her belt and carefully puts it onto the table next to the chessboard. Then she flees the room, leaving both me and Cullen standing there.

He stares at the letter for what seems an eternity before he picks it up and breaks the seal of the envelope. He skims over the text and I can watch his composure crumble with every line.

"Feeling like a complete ass now?" I ask with my arms crossed in front of my chest.

Cullen nods slowly, still standing with his back turned to me. "Thank you for saving my family."

"We just did, what Grey Wardens do."

He neatly folds the letter until it's only a tiny rectangle. "Shouldn't you be going after her?" he asks without looking at me.

"Actually I think, you should be going after her, Cullen."

"I'm not very good at saying sorry." He rubs the back of his neck, as he looks over his shoulder and offers an apologetic smile.

"I'd say that line is a rather good start. Keep it in mind. And I'd hurry if I were you before she has time to recover and get angry. I wouldn't advice getting near her then - at least not without a shield. She has the habit to throw things at people she's mad at."

Cullen doesn't move. Instead he unfolds the letter again only to fold it once more. "That still doesn't change anything about what I said about her recruiting that mage." He looks up at me, the anger returning to his voice. Boy, he's such a furious man! "You were trained to become a templar. How could you let her recruit a blood mage?"

"I am a Grey Warden now. We do what we have to do and templars do what they have to do. I don't say I like this - but I do not have to like it as long as it helps the order."

"I doubt we're ever going to agree on that matter," he mumbles. "Alright..." Cullen straightens his shoulders. "Lets get this over with. I am going to thank her but I am not going to apologize. If she can't handle the truth, that's not my fault."

"Do you know what happened to Teyrn Cousland and his wife and the rest of the family?" I ask, following Cullen in search of Rori.

"No, I'm not interested in politics," he tries to shut me up before I can push a conversation on him.
Just I have no intention to let him off the hook.

"They got murdered within their own castle by a traitor. Rori is the only one who got away that night."

Cullen winces. "Now," he groans, "I really feel like a complete ass."

We turn around a corner and find Rori sitting on the steps of a small dais that leads to a statue holding a bowl. She's bawling her eyes out while Shale stands next to her, looking rather helpless at such a display of human weakness. "Is that the flesh creature that made the Grey Warden cry?" the golem rumbles at the sight of Cullen. "Shall I crush its head like a grape?"
"The Honnleath golem!" Cullen exclaims, keeping his distance in case Shale really intends to crush his head like a grape. "It talks," he adds stupidly, ogling the golem as if he has never seen it before.

"It is the brat that used to climb on me and sit on my head," Shale observes.

"Oh... yeah," Cullen chuckles, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he fondly remembers his childhood days.

"Perhaps I should sit on its head in return," Shale grumbles. "See if it still thinks this is funny."

"Is it always so hostile?" Cullen whispers to me.

"Try treating it like a person for a change," Rori snuffles and wipes her nose at her sleeve. Chuckling I shake my head and search for my handkerchief. Why she never has one herself, I will never understand.

"Don't cry, kitten," I comfort her as I wipe her nose as if she was a child. She answers with a crooked grin despite the tears still shining in her eyes. Her lips quiver as she tries to regain her composure, which ends in her still crying and having a hiccup. Smiling softly I wrap her in my arms, sitting at the dais next to her. "What is wrong with you, Rori?"

"Nothing," she insists stubbornly, with her eyes cast down.

"Don't you feed me such nonesense. Cullen bashes you and you start crying. That's not how you are. You'd have snapped back at him. Something's been bothering you."

"Maybe I just figured, he's right," she sighs, resting her head at my shoulder.

"He is not."

She arches an eyebrow at me.

"Well not entirely," I admit. "But that's nothing that should make you cry."

She shakes her head, slightly inclining it towards Cullen still keeping his distance from Shale. "Delayed, not dismissed," I tell her and kiss the tip of her nose.

"Are you done now?" the young templar asks clearly unnerved, when I pull Rori to her feet.

"With you?" she snaps, sticking out her chin defiantly as she turns towards the templar. Cullen can call himself lucky she's got nothing to throw at him at hand. "I think so."

Now, that sounds far more like Rori.

"Look, I thank you for rescuing my family but I will not pretend to be sorry for what I said," Cullen growls, leading the way downstairs without looking back. He clearly wants to get rid of us and we obediently follow him like a flock of sheep. "Get off your high horse and start thinking before you act. Life is not a bed of roses - you should know that by now, shouldn't you?"

"Your sister is so sweet. How did you turn out to become such an ass?" Rori mumbles loud enough for him to hear.
She and Cullen agree like cats and dogs.

The problem is that Rori has a rather liberal point of view when it comes to mages, while Cullen's is more than just conservative. It's quite radical - which is not much of a surprise, considering he had a superevil bloodmage mess around with his mind after said superevil bloodmage murdered all of his comrades right in front of his eyes. One probably should be real worried if Cullen wasn't responding to all this just the way he does.

Rori is far more practical. She has seen what mages can do - both good and evil. But Rori being Rori, she wouldn't do without the benefits of magic just because of the risk of something going awfully wrong. Cullen - well, he probably would rather put them all through the Rite of Tranquility.

I'm torn. I really am.

Mages like Wynne - Maker, I adore that old granny mage... despite her wicked sense of humor and her pinching my cheeks everytime she makes fun of me... but don't tell her! There'll be no living with her! Well, Wynne, she's such a sweet old lady and thinking of her, I just cannot agree with Cullen.

Then there's Morrigan. She gives me the creeps. If all mages were like her, I'd be totally pro-Cullen. Rori keeps telling me Morrigan is like a wild animal, that she just doesn't know how to behave around other people. I'd still rather cuddle a wild wolf with canine madness than trust Morrigan. She and her mother, all they ever do is manipulate and lie. I still haven't figured out, why Flemeth would help Rori and me, but it for sure was not for charity's sake. That makes it far easier not to feel guilty for having killed her. Flemeth for sure doesn't give me no sleepless nights.

Maybe I should introduce Cullen to Morrigan...

Shale and I trudge behind as not to get into the line of fire while Rori and Cullen hiss and bark at each other.

"You keep acting as if I saved Jowan!" Rori exclaims. "Becoming a Grey Warden is not a reward. He's going to pay dearly for this. I told you before, didn't I?"

"You seem quite fine to me," Cullen comments, his eyes raking over her in a way that makes me want to punch him - despite and because of his visible contempt. Rori can wrap a lot of men around her little finger - I know what I'm talking about - but Cullen is none of them.

"You have absolutely no idea," Rori mumbles gloomily.

"Can't you see how wrong this is?" Cullen cries out, stopping so abruptly, Rori runs straight into him. He grabs her by her shoulders to stop her from stumbling. "He murdered all those people and still he lives. What would you say if someone did the same with the murderer of your family?" He shakes her so forcefully he makes her teeth clatter.

"Whoa, careful!" I grab his wrist to stop him. "I happen to be rather fond of this young lady."

"So I noticed," the young templar snorts, his hands still resting on her shoulders. At least he has stopped shaking her.

"Fine, you're right, Ser Cullen, I wouldn't like that at all," Rori admits as she shrugs off his hands. With her fists clenched at her sides, her knuckles turning white, she fights to regain her composure. "Still, it's not the same. Jowan tried to protect his love and himself."

"And that excuses the use of blood magic in your opinion?" Cullen pushes the door that leads to the entrance hall open so forcefully that the wings crash against the wall. His hardly controlled fury
makes the mages we meet scramble out of his way and hide in the shadows.

The mages are as afraid of Cullen as he is of them. One doesn't have to be a genius to figure that's not a good combination. Templars and mages equally afraid of each other... the templars trying to secure themselves and the people they have sworn to protect by becoming more and more oppressive, the mages not able to endure any more pressure, the voice of reason being suffocated by it - this is going to lead towards a catastrophe sooner or later.

"No, no, it does not. You're not listenting!" Rori cries out in exasperation. "Jowan did wrong but his motives weren't evil. And he dearly regrets all the things he did. And although he cannot make it undone, maybe he will save many people's lives as a Warden. He cannot do anything when he's dead." Rori's hackles are raised by now as well. "And he could be useful for the Grey Wardens, that being the main reason why I recuited him."

"What could he be useful for? Do the Grey Wardens use bloodmagic?" Cullen hisses, squinting his eyes suspiciously at Rori. She doesn't even bother with an answer but only glares at him piercingly.

Smart.

I'd be stammering and stuttering by now, talking myself into an early grave.

Having your body transformed into something else by drinking magically prepared darkspawn blood.

Having an ancient bloodmage continue his research ethnically but being initiated by the use of bloodmagic.

Having the daughter of infamous Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds, in your party and allowing her to use her mother's grimoire.

And poor Cullen already is unhappy with us when he's so absolutely clueless.

I think, we better keep him blissfully oblivious.

That's healthier for all of us.

"His motives killed many people. Don't tell me, you're that pathetic and got touched by his love story," Cullen sneers, hurrying down the stairs towards the cave where the boat waits for us. "Lily saw him as what he really was and did not follow him when she could." Cullen's mouth is but a thin line, then he whispers in a voice hardly audible: "Love doesn't excuse anything."

The way he says that last sentence makes me prick up my ears.

"Love is a very strong sentiment, Cullen," Rori says softly. So the sorrow in his voice hasn't gone unnoticed by her.

"So you'd do the same if you were in Jowan's situation? You'd let others die to rescue your love?" Cullen demands to know, turning on his heels to face her. Whatever has touched him to soften for that brief moment, it is gone.

Rori's eyes, so full of fear, dart towards me.

Oh, kitten...

"I don't know," she whispers, voicing the confession I don't even dare to make to myself.
To lose her... I don't want to imagine it. I just can't. It's so painful that I shy away from the mere thought, although I try to prepare myself for what could become inevitable. Whenever I try to imagine life without Rori, my mind goes blank. All I can see then is darkness. I'd rather die for her than see her die. I see my own emotions reflected in her big blue eyes now.

"And I pray to the Maker that I never have to find out," she adds, her eyes still on me. Rori's voice is so small, I can hardly hear her. But I do not have to hear her to know it's just what I would have said if Cullen had asked me instead.

"That is the wrong answer, Lady Cousland," Cullen snorts.

We all know it's the wrong answer.

Templars, Grey Wardens, we are supposed to serve. Whatever we want, whatever we feel, it shouldn't matter.

"But the only one I can truthfully give," Rori admits quietly.

"Then my prayers are with you and all who depend on you," Cullen says far softer than I would have expected.

There's no goodbyes, just curt nods before we climb into the boat. As the ferryman rows us out of the cave, Rori and I look back at Cullen standing there all alone at the steep and narrow staircase, hesitating as if he first has to search for the strength inside of him to climb it.

"He looks lost," Rori whispers. She raises a hand for a last farewell. With some delay Cullen responds like someone who doesn't expect the world to be friendly towards him.

"He is lost," I mumble as I wrap my cloak around my trembling girl again as soon as the boat floats out of the cave into the open. The wind mercilessly whips at us and the cold bites through our clothes getting soaked by the fog. Cullen vanishes from our sight, the darkness of the cave swallows him, reminding me once more of a monster's mouth.

"Maybe someday someone will find him."
Despite my cloak Rori shivers so badly, I begin to worry she could be ill. She insists she is not but I will have Wynne take a look at her anyway. We find the rest of our little party in the orchard behind the Spoiled Princess where they have set up our tents. The refugees from the south mean good business for the innkeeper - at least those with enough coins. Rori groans when she sees our tents and excuses herself, marching off towards the inn while I search for Wynne.

Before I can find her, Rori returns, seemingly rather content with herself. "Come on, I got a room for us." I want to protest as I really think she should be talking to Wynne. She looks rather pale but the prospect of sleeping in a real bed tonight seems to make her feel a bit better. Maybe she just needs a rest.

The room turns out to be a suite, actually the only suite of the inn, fittingly called the Princess Suite. "I am a spoiled noble brat that got fed with a silver spoon all of her life," Rori says, grinning impishly, when I point out our companions are outside in their tents. "I deserve this. It's my birthright."

The room is furnished with one large and impressingly clean bed, a wardrobe, two armchairs and a table in front of a fireplace with a crackling fire and candles on the mantelpiece. The table is set with plates, two bottles of wine and lamb chops, baked potatoes, a bowl of different vegetables, bread, fruit and cheese.

"Feeling rather decadent today, aren't you?" I laugh, fishing a lamb chop from the plate. Maker, I'm starving.

"You haven't yet seen everything, my handsome bastard prince," she teases, her voice a low and husky purr. I swallow hard and stare at her hungrily. Suddenly the lamb chop isn't the most appetizing thing in the room anymore. She takes my hand and drags me along, stealing the lamb chop from me at the same time.

"Hey!"

Rori just smiles and feeds me, allowing me to lick her fingers clean. Mhmm... I could get used to a bit of decadence sometimes.

Behind a screen painted with running mabaris there's a large wooden bathtub filled with steaming hot water. Rori sighs contently at the mere sight. "I've been looking forward to a hot bath all day long," she confesses, stretching like a cat that just woke from a nap. Despite the warmth in the room, she hugs herself and shudders.

I help her getting undressed. And she eagerly returns the favour. Her small hands tenderly roam my chest and belly once she has gotten rid of my shirt, feeling the smoothness of my skin and the firmness of my muscles underneath. She sighs contently, tiptoeing to kiss me.

Oh, I so know where this will all lead to.

First it gets us into the bathtub together. The water is almost scalding and I only realize how tense Rori must have been all day long when she relaxes against me. She sits between my legs with her back resting against my chest and my arms wrapped around her while I feed her and myself with grapes from a wooden bowl we have floating on the water. She keeps teasingly sucking at my fingers every time I pop a grape into her mouth.
Such a temptress.

So she wants to play games? I'm in.

I abandon the grapes and nuzzle Rori's neck instead, brushing aside the damp strands of her crimson hair. She tilts her head back, exposing her throat to me as I trail little bites down to the crook of her neck and up again to nibble at her earlobe. My hands cup both her breasts, squeezing them tenderly first and rougher when Rori snarls at me. So we're not playing nice this time. I get it.

First I take her hands and place them on both sides of the bathtub, making her clutch the rim. "Your hands stay right there and you will not touch anything else until you got my permission."

A shudder runs through her at the sound of my voice purring in her ear and she nods obediently, shivering in anticipation.

"Good girl."

I don't know why, but it really turns Rori on when I order her around in bed. To be honest it turns me on, too, to watch her submit. I have no idea where this comes from as I love her strength and sass, her stubbornness and the way she always has to talk back.

But here I am in command and for a change that is really... thrilling. I love to be in control over her.

I pinch her nipples hard enough to make her cry out both in pain and pleasure. While squeezing and kneading her breasts, I keep biting and sucking at her neck, eliciting those cute mewing noises from her, every single one of them making my length twitch. One of my hands travels down across the flat of her belly and the little patch of now damp curls between her legs. My arousal is pressing hard against her back and as she squirms, she rubs it with her firm little buttocks.

Maker's Breath!

In moments like that I am still at awe at what I've been missing all that time before Rori stumbled into my life. And I call myself a moron for having turned her down when she asked me first to make love to her.

My fingers have found that hard pebble between her legs, rubbing it, squeezing it gently. Rori's head rolls from side to side, she arches her back, her lips parted to allow those beautiful moans of pleasure escape her throat. Her body is glistening and slick with foam and water. I can watch her in the huge gold-framed mirror right across the room.

Maker's Breath!

I find myself growing really fond of mirrors.

She's close. I can sense the tension rise inside of her, the way her body stiffens and her breathing gets ragged. She closes her eyes and surrenders her body to my control.

Pleasing a woman, I find it's similar to learning how to play an instrument. Rori and I, we had our share of out-of-tune encounters, but we've improved, we've gotten to know each other better, explored what we like and by now... it's music. More even... it's a symphony.

For now Rori calls the tune and I play second fiddle. Not that I mind. She's panting and gasping, mewing softly in her afterglow of ultimate pleasure. Oh, it's such a lovely sound and sight. The way her bosom heaves, her lips slightly parted, her eyes half closed and hazy.
It's time for my reward.

I make her kneel so that I can watch her in the mirror, and grasp the rim of the bathtub for support, her little ass raised high and I behind her. "Alistair!" Rori gasps when I enter her with one forceful thrust. She's all slick and ready and eager to take me in. I spend my time watching me slide in and out of her in an excruciatingly slow rhythm, both hands resting at her hips to direct her motions. "Harder!" she hisses, trying to push herself back on me.

Oh no! You won't!

I stop moving and she snarls in frustration, bucking violently to shake my hands off. Then she gasps both in surprise, pain and pleasure when I bring down three sharp slaps to her buttocks. "You're not the one in control here. Do you understand?" I growl, watching her expression in the mirror, how she bites her lips at the sound of my voice, the way her cheeks blush and how her eyes grow wide and round. "I asked if you understood?" I slap her again, enjoying the shiver that runs through her body.

"Yes, my prince," she whispers huskily, biting her lips to stop herself from grinning widely while intending to look docile. She fails miserably. It makes me chuckle.

"You're so naughty," I scold her, rubbing her buttocks gently where my palm has struck her.

"You're one to talk!"

"All your fault. Before you walked into my life I've been a completely innocent and docile young man with thoughts as pure as freshly fallen snow."

Rori's only response is a loud snort.

"You're really asking for this, you know?" I sigh and slap her again. She winces, then opens her mouth for a smart retort that gets drowned by her lustful cry when I ram into her forcefully. She demanded this to be harder... and who am I to deny?

When I'm done with her, there's more water on the floor than in the tub and we are both utterly spent. My brain feels fuzzy. My whole body still trembles in the aftermath of our wild lovemaking. And I grin so stupidly that I find myself wondering if the Chantry was right after all - that you destroy your own mind by indulging in smutty, non-reproductive... err... lamppost licking... simply for your own sinful pleasure.

Duh, I so don't care.

We somehow manage to climb out of the bathtub and dry ourselves. Then we have a picnic in bed. Afterwards I make love to Rori again. Slowly this time, tenderly. We're both too tired and full to be able to perform anything out of the ordinary.

I almost drift off to sleep when I collapse on top of my beautiful and beloved ginger. I'm so exhausted and still I feel so alive. She has that effect on me. Everything before Rori now seems dull. It's as if my life has been drawn in shades of grey and now there's colouring everywhere. I kiss and nuzzle her neck before I pull out of her lazily. She stretches like a cat, stiffling a yawn and watching me contently from half closed eyes.

Suddenly her eyes snap open and she sits up, startled. "Oh!" she gasps, lifting her hand to her mouth. I follow her gaze and find myself staring down at my still half erect length all covered in bright crimson blood.
I'm not particularly whiny when getting injured during battle. Really, I'm not! Afterwards, yeah, I perhaps have a tendency to whine and complain and wail... but in the heat of the moment I do not falter. I've seen a whole lot of real bad injuries...

Like when my arm was broken and the bones were sticking out of my flesh... Or when my leg was twisted in a way it was actually only attached to the rest of my body by some skin and fibers... Ah, wait, I didn't really get to see that. I passed out when the ogre twisted my leg but Zevran gave me a rather explicit description afterwards... That still counts, doesn't it? Or when a hurlock sliced through Rori's leather armor and she practically had to stuff her bowels back in - err, alright, forget about that... I got violently sick at that sight and shrieked until Wynne told me to shut the fuck up because she couldn't work while I was being noisy.

But right now at the sight of my... manhood... all slick with bright crimson blood I feel like fainting. And like getting violently sick and shriek. I just can't decide what to do first, so I just stare in pure blank horror and stammer.

"Oh... Maker... fuck!"

"Alistair..."

"Bloody blast it!... Merciful Andraste!"

"Alistair..."

"That's... blood... ohhhh... damn... blast, blast, blast!"

"Alistair!" Rori says so sharply that I have to look at her. "This is not your blood," she adds firmly once she has my attention.

"It is not?" I ask stupidly. "Then where does it come from?"

"It's mine," she says matter-of-factly.

"Yours?" I croak, only now noticing the crimson smudge on the bedcloth between her legs. "But... oh Maker! Are you hurt? Did I hurt you?" I'm close to panicking, while at the same time a tidal wave of pure relief washes over me. No damage done to my most private parts! I almost laugh out loud in a very maniac way. I can rein myself in enough to suffocate the urge and all that comes out is a strangely strangled sound.

"Alistair, you did not hurt me," Rori gasps in exasperation. I am certainly missing something here. Blood means injuries. She looks fine, though. Well, she blushes a brighter shade of pink and looks thoroughly ashamed while she hugs her pillow to herself. "All women got that once a month," she explains in a very small voice when I only stare uncomprehendingly at her. She peers at me timidly over the rim of her pillow.

"I know!" I wail, finally getting what is going on.

Maker, she has to think I am a complete moron!

Well, I certainly behave like one. I should have realized that's what it is. Growing up in the Chantry means growing up around a whole lot of women... travelling with young women in close proximity and without much privacy... you cannot not notice... and once you have noticed, you choose to ignore... Unless you are Zevran. Then you go and ask the woman in question if you can give her a massage. He's been nagging Leliana and Morrigan about it. But never Rori. Not once - as far as I recall, now I force myself to think about it... "But... not you..."
"And you didn't think that's somewhat weird?" she whines from behind the pillow. She has squeezed her legs shut by now and crawled as far away from me as possible. "Maker... why does this have to happen now?"

"Err... no? Yes? I don't know. But now you mention it..." Oh blast it! She's right, it is weird. But I didn't pay much attention when it came to that part of her being a woman. I guess, I should have... then again, no... I mean, how could I have probably brought up such a topic anyway. "I... I'm sorry... I really don't know how to handle this... Maker, I act like a fool!"

I so bet something like that has never happened to Zevran. Not ever. All the awkwardness got reserved for me alone. And for Rori, it seems. The poor girl is squirming uncomfortably.

"No, I am sorry. If I had known it would happen I'd not have... then you wouldn't... I wouldn't have bothered you with my inconveniences," she whimpers while she tries to fish a towel from the bedside table without leaving her hiding place behind the pillow.

"You are never an inconvenience to me, kitten." That I even made her think she could be, is proof enough for how idiotic I actually behave. I take pity in her and hand her the towel.

"I just didn't expect this to happen anymore," Rori whispers, her voice sounding choked. She's so utterly ashamed of her disgraceful display - obviously her opinion, certainly not mine - that she cannot even look at me. "After the Joining it just... stopped. And then you said Grey Wardens cannot have children and it somehow made sense." Oh blast! Now she's crying.

"Rori, why didn't you say anything?" She scrambles away when I close the distance between us but I won't let her and hug her anyway. "Hush, kitten, it's alright. Hey, don't cry. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Say what?" she sobs against my chest. "I asked you about what changes physically when one becomes a Grey Warden, remember? ... But... how could I possibly have asked about... that?" The mere thought seems to horrify her.

That couldn't have been so hard to do, could it? I mean, it can't be healthy to just stop having... that... right? Did it hurt? It certainly must have worried her. "How about: Alistair, I haven't... I have... there's not been any... um..." Maker! This is awkward. "Blast!" I groan. This is much harder than I thought. It's actually... impossible. I try to imagine how she stands there in front of me and goes: Hey, Alistair, my menses have stopped, you got any idea why? "Alright, point taken. No way you could have said anything about that... to me." I blush so hard it feels as if my head is burning.

"You're cute," Rori smiles while the tears still stream down her face. Her sobs have faded but now she has one of these adorable hiccups.

"Glad my idiocy and awkwardness are at least amusing." I hug her closer and kiss the top of her head as I try to comfort her. I really don't want her to feel uncomfortable around me. "You must have been worried."

Rori shrugs and offers a sheepishly crooked grin. "My family murdered, my brother missing, I marked a traitor and kingslayer, a Blight to end... my... menses not happening anymore wasn't my biggest problem, you see."

Now she mentions it...

"Does... does it hurt?" I ask shyly. Maker, I so don't know absolutely nothing about women.

"Now? Not really."
Not really? How can something not really hurt. It hurts or it doesn't hurt. Does it hurt a bit? Does it feel uncomfortable? Does she need me to do something? I mean, I cannot just let her sit there and... bleed! "And... what do you... what do we do now? Should I fetch Wynne?"

"No," she laughs, her hiccup making this sound even cuter. "I clean up the mess, make sure I don't cause any more and then we go to sleep."

Said and done. But of course I help her clean the mess, myself, her. I mean, I cannot just let her do this all alone and watch. Not when she's in such a... condition. The way I tuck her into bed makes her smile. "I'm not ill, Alistair," she reminds me when I wrap my arms around her.

"Let me fuss a little, that at least gives me the illusion I could do something for you," mumble as I bury my face in her hair.

I cannot sleep. I lie there and stare at the darkness, feeling Rori sleeplessly shift in my embrace. "Alistair?" she finally whispers. "How do you know Grey Wardens cannot have babies?"

"Duncan told me," I whisper back. I was already wondering when she would ask.

"He hardly told you anything of importance but he told you that?"

"Yeah, funny, isn't it? That's certainly some piece of information that has come in handy."

"Has it?"

"It saved you from Morrigan's awful contraceptive brews."

"It did indeed," she admits and shudders.

"When I was introduced to my fellow Grey Wardens I asked about their families," I explain. Hearing others talk about their families, helps me to imagine how it could have been for me. It's... I don't know. Perhaps I just like to torture myself. "When most of them said they didn't have any children, I wondered why and so Duncan told me, that with the taint it is not recommended to have children - and that it doesn't happen easily anyway."

"So there's absolutely no chance?" The way she says this, she's been thinking a lot about that matter..

"Duncan personally only knew about one Grey Warden who had a child. An elven mage called Fiona. Duncan named his axe Fiona, too, so I first thought he and her... But he said no and that with two Grey Wardens it is probably impossible."

"But he did not know for sure," Rori observes. I can hear the stubborn defiance in her voice. Her mind certainly is already working on a solution for this problem.

"It's a bit early to worry about that, don't you think?" We've only been together for a few weeks. And we are still so young. And there's the Blight. The thing about making me king. Maker, I really have other things to worry about than a possible offspring!

"Oh, yes, yes, too early now... but someday..."

"Rori, you do realize that Grey Wardens don't live long, don't you? The Calling will end our lives before we grow old - if we don't die in battle."

"Avernus is a Grey Warden. And he's more than 200 years old," she points out tenaciously. "He should have heard the Calling by now, shouldn't he?"
"Avernus is a completely fucked up bloodmage!"

"There has to be a way...." she murmurs, completely not listening to what I say. She's already half asleep, mumbling more to herself than talking to me. "Blight first, everything else later."

Rori once said, she likes to believe she will have a future. She certainly has plans for that far away time. I do hope, she'll get to live long enough to see it happen. But I guess, she's just too stubborn to die. So if anybody has a chance to survive this whole Blight and indeed see her happy ending, then it's probably Rori. This, somehow, is a very comforting thought.
The next morning I butt heads with Rori.

I want to tuck her into bed, feed her with chicken soup, cuddle her or read a book to her... Well, you get the impression.

She wants to kill darkspawn.

"We will not lose this battle just because you stay in bed for one day when you're feeling miserable!" I snap, arms crossed in front of my chest, challenging her to dare and get out of bed. But of course that's just exactly what she does.

"Alistair, we cannot just drop everything we're doing every time I don't feel well! The archdemon won't be so kind to wait for me not to be indisposed," she retorts, her last words sounding quite pressed when she cringes in pain, clutching her stomach. "I'm alright. Everything's okay. This will go away..."

Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, kitten! I'm far from being an expert, but she looks anything but alright.

"Andraste's flaming sword, Rori, do I have to tie you to the bedposts to make you stay in bed?" I snarl, snatching her boots from her. First she glares piercingly at me, then her eyes grow wide and round, darkening at my suggestion. She chews at her lower lip as she regards me in a completely wicked way. Then she cramps again and the moment is gone.

"Oh fuck," she breathes but scrambles after me anyway to retreat her boots. I just won't give them to her. "Fine," she huffs and marches out of the room barefooted. She's already on horseback when I catch up with her.

For the next few hours she completely refuses to speak with me while I watch her cringe, wince and bend over in her saddle, listen to her curse and whimper, witness her disappear in the bushes every half an hour, see her shiver and growing visibly paler, her eyes turning hazy. She looks as if she's about to faint any time soon. That's when I've had about enough and call for a halt.

"We set up camp here and now," I declare. Rori opens her mouth to protest, but I just glare at her in a way that makes her shut up before she even got started.

"Who are you, and what did you do with my sweet, charming Alistair?" she sulks.

From the very beginning when I first saw her, I felt the urge to protect her. Nothing has changed about that. Actually, that need becomes stronger with every day we spend together. In battle I am at her side to aid her and take any blow before it can get through to her. And now it seems, I have to protect her from her own stubbornness. She can snap and hiss and snarl, I won't let her risk her health, just because she believes she has to pretend to be strong when she is not.

I leave her with Wynne. Two minutes later the granny mage scolds my beloved fellow Warden loud enough for the whole camp to hear. Afterwards we are stranded in the middle of nowhere in the pouring rain for the whole next day. Wynne is obviously scarier than I am.

Despite Rori claiming she is fine, she is not. Wynne says her whole inner balance got disturbed by
something - probably the Joining, but we just cannot tell Wynne about that. I have no idea what the
old lady means but it seems to be about Rori's painful cramps and a far too heavy bloodloss. I don't
ask for details and thankfully nobody has the desire to give them to me... Well, Wynne does, but I
hurriedly excuse myself, convince Leliana to lend me the novel of some upcoming dwarven author
and huddle in the tent with my pouting girl. Her mood brightens visibly when she's snuggled to me
and I read to her.

She could have had all this in the comfortable, cozy and warm suite at the Spoiled Princess, but no!
Her Stubbornness just wouldn't listen! So now she has to deal with a soaked tent reeking of wet dog
and filthy socks. I give her credit, she doesn't complain. For a stuck-up noble brat she does damn
well at coping with the lack of luxury. What Rori does complain about is the potions Wynne mixes
for her. Rori has to drink one every hour, which makes for a whole lot more head-butting with her as
she always squeezes her mouth shut to a thin line, claiming she already feels much better.

"Alistair, what's this?" Wynne asks accusingly, when I show up to fetch another of Rori's potions.
She holds up a filthy piece of wool, clenched between the fingertips of her index finger and thumb. If
she had pincers, she'd not touch it at all.

"It's a sock?" I observe after thoroughly examining it. It looks oddly familiar.

"It's a filthy sock," Wynne corrects me. "How did it find its way to my bedroll?"

"Maybe it likes you? Socks are sneaky like that," I offer. With all the tales she keeps telling when
she's tipsy about her former lovers and so on, that sock could belong to anybody! Not that I want to
imagine anything like that. Or listen to her when she tells those tales. It's most embarrassing -
especially when Zevran is drunk, too. I don't understand half the things they talk about. "Anyway,
it's not mine."

"It has your name stitched on it," she points out, glaring at me as she turns the sock for me to read the
letters.

Blast! "Oh. Haha. Ha. Part of templar training, back at the Chantry. The men were... always getting
their socks mixed up." And their handkerchiefs. Their smallclothes. Their shirts. I got my name
stitched on all my clothes. It took me ages to do so. Every time I stitched my name on another cloth I
so wished my name was Ron or Ben or Joe or anything else blissfully short. There was a templar
(named Ed in my garrison. Everybody envied him! Try to stitch 'Alistair' on a sock. You'll get what I
mean. "Anyway, uh, sorry about that." I grin sheepishly at her, shrugging apologetically while I
wonder how in the name of the Maker my sock got to end up in Wynne's bedroll. I blame Barkley.
That dog keeps dragging my things around. "I'll take it from you right now." I hurry to retrieve the
sock form her as Wynne pointedly glares daggers at me while waving it in front of my nose. "One of
my socks is feeling a little damp anyway. A change would be nice." It's raining buckets and I've
been wading through puddles to get here to fetch Rori's medicine.

I hop on one foot, pulling at my boot, when Wynne's shocked expression stops me for the moment.
"You're going to put it on?" she exclaims, truly horrified. "It's filthy!"

"And dry," I point out. I can neither see it's filthy nor smell it as long as I keep my boots on. So who
cares if it's not entirely clean? "We're not exactly traveling in the lap of luxury here."

Wynne shakes her head in disgust."What hideous habits you've picked up."

"Do you have Rori's potion ready?" I ask, ignoring her grimace when I pull the damp sock of my
foot and replace it by the filthy one. Not that the damp sock is any less filthy. I dare say it's actually
filthier which makes the one I only just retrieved quite an improvement.
Wynne wordlessly hands the cup to me. "How she endures your smelly socks is completely beyond me."

"The dog sleeps in our tent," I remind her. "Best way to fight an awful stench is to overlay it with something smelling even worse."

"Ewww, her dog is filthy, I can smell him fifty yards off!" Wynne shudders. "I have to ask her if I can bathe him."

"If you do so, could you wash my socks, too? Hey! ... don't hit me! I'm off... now."

Three days later we finally arrive at the gates of Orzammar. Rori sits in the saddle in front of me like a child - the only way Wynne allows her to ride because she is afraid Rori could fall off her horse. Wynne's healing has helped her but the mage says her body has to get used to yet another change and it will take some time for her to get adjusted.

"Look at all those people hawking their wares! It's almost like a little city," Leliana remarks as we ride up the slope at the Frostback Mountains.

"Oh, my. I didn't expect it to be this crowded," Wynne agrees. "Not that time of the year."

"And still it's far less than last time we stopped by," Rori observes, pointing out the abandoned stalls and merchants leaving. This cannot all be about the first snowfall. We heard some rumours about Orzammar being closed down on our way but we didn't really expect it to be completely cut off the surface.

"Most traders aren't allowed into Orzammar, so they just sort of... gather near the doors," I explain. "There's no laws up here at all, I'm told."

"Now, it seems, there's nobody allowed in," Rori says gloomily, leaning her head against my chest. "Do you think the dwarves at least will come out if we ask nicely? I don't necessarily have to go underground as long as they send an army to the surface."

We lead our horses to an inn with several stables, a place where merchants can leave their mounts and carts when entering the dwarven city. Now there's enough space for a group three times as big as ours and the dwarven innkeeper is more than delighted to welcome us and our coin.

On entering the inn, Rori gets shoved aside so hard by a fumingly angry dwarf on his way out that she tumbles backwards and comes to land in the lap of yet another dwarf, sitting comfortably in an armchair.

"Bartrand tosses a lot of things at me... they are seldomly as lovely as you are," the dwarf remarks with a pleasantly deep chuckle when Rori scrambles off him, blushing deep crimson as she stammers an apology. I always thought all dwarves wear beards - well, not Sandal, but he's a kid - but this one doesn't. He has his sandy hair pulled back in a ponytail and wears a shirt unbuttoned almost to his waist, showing off a great amount of chest hair. "Oh, don't be sorry. If anybody should be, it's Bartrand. I for sure am not. I've not had many better things just falling into my lap." Now even Rori's ears are a brighter shade of pink. I sneak my arm around her waist possessively, causing the dwarf to chuckle with undisguised amusement.

"Why was he so angry?" Rori asks when the dwarf invites us to have a drink with him.

"My brother is angry most of the time and even he doesn't know why. I wouldn't waste any thought on him if I were you. But if you have to know: Orzammar is closed. The king died and they can't decide on a new one. That's bad for business. Bartrand came all the way from Kirkwall for a deal
and now it's not happening. Sucks to be him." Raising a hand, the dwarf beckons the waitress to serve the drinks. "Varric Tethras, rogue, storyteller and, occasionally, unwelcome tagalong." He holds out a hand for us to shake.

"Rori Cousland, Grey Warden, stuck-up noble brat and, most of the time, major pain in the neck."

"Alistair, Grey Warden, almost-templar and, occasionally, deliverer of witty-one liners and bad news."

"Fereldan Grey Wardens, huh? Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"We hardly ever do, what we are supposed to do," Rori replies sweetly, sipping her wine.

"Ha!" Varric laughs, his eyes glinting with mischief. "So, it is said there's a Blight. What do you intend to do about it?"

"End it of course," Rori says matter-of-factly and with her very own determined stubbornness.

"Now, I get the feeling you have a grand tale to tell," Varric chuckles, leaning back in his armchair with his fingers steepled in front of his chest. "Mind if you fill me in on your adventures so far?"

"Mind if you refill our glasses before?"
Despite Orzammar being closed down, Rori still wants to give it a try. So the next morning, when we both kinda feel able to get up after a night of drinking with Varric Tethras, we're on our way up the huge staircase that leads to the impressive gates of Orzammar.

"What do dwarves need such a huge gate for?" I wonder, squinting my eyes at the bright morning light. It's not particularly sunny but with my splitting headache and major hangover, everything is just too much. Too loud, too bright, too everything.

"Maybe they want to compensate something?" Rori ponders. Her condition is in no way better than mine. I had to carry her to our room last night - which was not easily achieved as I could hardly walk myself anymore. I only got her out from under the table because Varric was kind enough to get her for me. Now, thinking about it, he dragged me out of there, too.

"Yesterday I warned you, yes I did, and I told you to not come running to me," Wynne scolds from behind as Rori and I drag each other along, groaning and complaining all the way.

"How can she be so... awake?" Rori groans. "She drank more than we did together."

In front of the gates we witness an argument between the guards and some of Loghain's boot lickers.

"King Loghain will not suffer the delay of his appointed messenger!"

"Wow, he didn't waste time, did he? King Loghain... I think I am going to be sick," Rori mumbles. "Could also be the ale, though..." For a moment I fear, she's really going to vomit right onto the boots of the enraged messenger. She hiccups loudly, making the messenger turn and glare at her.

"This land is hold in the trust of the sovereign dwarven kings. I cannot allow entry at this time," the dwarven guard says firmly and utterly unimpressed by the boot licker's rant.

"King Loghain demands the allegiance of the deshyr or lords or whatever you call them in your Assembly. I am his appointed messenger."

"Wow, he's smarter than we thought," Rori yawns, stretching like a cat. "He at least figures he needs some help."

"After murdering almost all Grey Wardens and his rightful king and starting a civil war while a Blight is taking place. Very smart indeed," I snort.

"I don't care if you're the king's wiper, the guard informs the so called messenger. "Orzammar will have none but its own until the throne is settled."

Rori's hiccup has grown louder the more she tries to suppress it. The guard finally takes notice of her. "And what would you want?" he asks unnervedly.

"We have important business in Orzammar," she hiccups, trying to sound important - and failing miserably. All the guards see is a small girl with a shock of red curls, her huge eyes making her even more look like a child - and she's obviously in an aftermath of being heavily drunk.

"Gal, sleep off your hangover," the guard advises in a fatherly tone, returning Rori's crooked smile.

"None more important than mine!" the messenger snaps, his eyes scanning over her in contempt.
"Your business will wait," the guard informs us. We should have brought him a drink. He seems to need one.

"Why have your people retreated like this?" Rori slurs, swaying so badly, she tumbles against me. I catch her and begin to sway as well. It's Shale keeping us from tumbling down the whole staircase.

Maker... I will never again drink with a dwarf and that blasted granny mage.

"They hide because they are dwarves," the boot licker sneers.

"Oh... and Loghain ran away from the battle because he's a treacherous bastard," Rori says sweetly, her hiccup making her words almost incomprehensible. That Wynne starts to cough loudly the very same time prevents the messenger from hearing any of it.

The dwarf takes no offense. He's got some nerves. You put someone with a temper like Rori's in his spot and the messenger would find his ass being kicked down the stairs right now. The guard explains about the dead dwarven king and how they have trouble deciding on a new one and are facing a civil war.

"Are you having a déjà-vu, too?" Rori mutters.

"Yeah, sounds somewhat familiar," I agree. Boy, this means trouble. I bet we're going to end up in the line of fire. We're that lucky, you'll see. "Still, shouldn't we do something to get out of the cold and get done what we have to do?"

"I am a Grey Warden. This treaty obliges Orzammar to aid me." Rori pulls herself together and manages to get out a comprehensible coherent sentence - in between her hiccups. She fumbles around in her backpack until she finds the treaties, then drops them while fishing the right one out of the waterproof satchel. The wind picks them up and sends the pages flying.

"Fuck!" Rori exclaims, standing there like a fool as she watches the pages being blown away. I stand next to her in retarded companionship. Things like that only happen to Rori. And me. If not for that awful headache I'd be really worried about becoming king now. But all that pops up in my mind is: Blast, there fly our treaties!

Thankfully there's also some sober people in our party. So Zevran, Shale and Sten chase after the treaties while Rori hands the dwarven one to the guard, grinning sheepishly. The guard quirks an eyebrow at her. "Grey Warden, huh? Gal, if this is a drunken joke I will personally kick your pretty little ass down these stairs."

"Sorry. Got challenged by a dwarf yesterday night. Didn't think it would turn out that bad," Rori admits compunctiously, causing the guard to chuckle.

"The Wardens killed King Cailan and nearly doomed Ferelden! They are sworn enemies of King Loghain," the boot licker screeches, causing both Rori and me to flinch.

"Nonesense!" Rori hisses and spins around to face the messenger. It's impressive how quickly she can sober when she's angry. "Loghain, that treacherous backstabbing bastard, ran away from the battlefield and left his king alone to die! It was his fucking plan to light that damn beacon! And then he didn't show up!"

"How dare you!" the messenger breathes, straightening to tower over her. Considering Rori's height, towering over her is not that difficult. Being used to it, she stays rather unimpressed and just continues to stare the man down defiantly.
"Well, that is the royal seal," the guard mutters, unperturbed by Rori and the boot licker spitting at each other. "That means only the Assembly is authorized to address it. Grey Warden, you may pass."

"You're letting in a traitor? And a foreigner?" the messenger cries out in disbelief.

"No, he doesn't. The traitor's assigned messenger has to stay outside," Rori says sweetly, retrieving the treaties from the dwarf - and from our companions. They have thankfully managed to catch all of them before they got blown away. Now, that would have sucked, wouldn't it?

"In the name of King Loghain I demand that you execute this... stain on the honour of Ferelden!"

"Hey!" Rori and I exclaim. "If there's a stain, then it's Loghain himself," Rori rants on, fists clenched at her sides, red curls bopping around wildly on her head, she looks like a vengeful little imp. "That filthy, stinking heap of... of..."

"Pigeon crap," Shale prompts.

"You're not going to insult King Loghain, you deceitful slut," the boot licker roars, beckoning his men to draw their swords.

"That's enough! Raise your blade if you're so tough," Rori hisses like a cat. If she had claws she'd dig them into him now. She reaches for her own swords when I step in, pulling her away from Loghain's men.

"This is neither the right time nor the right place for a fight. Rein in your temper." I say more calmly than I actually feel. I am seething inside, Rori's outbreak voicing my concealed anger. Rori swallows hard as she looks up at me, tears of anger and frustration welling up in her eyes. "I know," I whisper, gently caressing the side of her face with the back of my hand. "But this man here did not kill your family." She inhales deeply, trembling with the effort to control her anger. "You're a Cousland, Rori."

"I remind her.

I watch her fight with her own emotions and succeed. She sheathes her swords and straightens, turning toward the messenger and his men with her blue eyes glaring icily at them. "Run to your false king."

"He coos in a dangerously calm and low voice. "The dwarves will not hear him today."

The messenger's eyes grow wide as he looks at her, trying to decide how dangerous a little girl like her could possibly be. His eyes dart toward me, then Sten and Shale and the mages... "You... you'll hear of this. King Loghain will see you quartered," he threatens.

"There's only one rightful king of Ferelden and that's not Loghain," Rori replies calmly. "I do not fear this king. Loghain, however, should."

"The bastard prince," the messenger sneers and spits out. "He will face the same fate as you do!"

And off they march.

What a way to start the day when you got a major hangover! I wish I hadn't crawled out of bed at all.

"All the darkspawn are fleeing the underground, and we are going there," Sten comments when the guards push the door open for us. That makes for quite an audience as all the people in the market below crane their necks to see what's going on.

"We're going there to fetch the dwarves and be right up here again before the darkspwan even notices we were gone," Rori says, sounding slightly unnerved.

"Are we... descending into the underground?" Morrigan breathes. "The thought of so much rock
over one's head is... disquieting."

"Afraid?" I tease, regretting it instantly when Morrigan glares at me like a viper would regard a rabbit.

"Now, let's see if we can make these dwarves live up to their promises," Rori sighs, tiredly.

We can't.

Well, not at once.

They need to have a king first - and guess, who's supposed to get this straight for them?

Yep.

Didn't I tell you?

It's time to go into a huddle.

"Watch out for that puddle of.....whatever it is." Leliana warns when we approach the Tapster's Tavern, a noisy and smelly place packed with noisy and smelly and most of all drunken dwarves.

"What is that smell? Dwarven vomit? Charming." I wrinkle my nose, sidestepping the puddle Leliana pointed out.

"Is that drunken singing I hear?" Wynne chuckles, clapping her hands giddily. "They are such a merry little people."

"I hope that is someone being murdered and not simply singing," Shale mutters. It at least cannot smell. But it can hear the wailing that reaches our ears whenever the door is thrust open and someone either stumbles in or out.

"Ha, drunken dwarves! What could be the harm in a few of those?" Zevran laughs, obviously the only one delighted by the outlook of us entering that tavern.

"Soooo... are we going in?" I ask, nudging Rori. She wears an utterly horrified expression, her eyes growing wider and larger when a redhaired dwarf without any pants comes staggering out of the door, running straight into Rori. He grabs her around the waist for support and - as he has just the right size - presses his face right at her bosom.

"Hello big-titty," he slurs drunkenly, wiggling his eyebrows at her as he looks up. "You and I, bucking the forbidden horse?" When he begins thrusting his hips at her to punctuate his intentions, Rori and I snap out of our stunned stupor. I grab the deviant bastard by the collar of his shirt - that he thankfully is still wearing, although it covers nothing at all - at least not the parts that require being covered - and yank him away from Rori. She at the same time grips his hair and pulls at it forcefully, while kicking at his most private and mostly exposed parts.

"Hey! Hey! No need to get all rowdy!" the dwarf grunts and lets go of her, holding his hands up in defense when I am about to punch him. "I'll be gone..." He scratches himself between the legs, snorts some snot onto the streets and waddles off. On his hairy buttocks there's a heart shaped tattoo reading 'Branka forever!'

"...I should have stayed in that cage." Sten remarks, watching the dwarf leave.

We press and push past the mass of dwarves to enter the tavern. What has looked bad from the
outside looks even worse when inside.

"Oh, wonderful! A dwarven tavern! I've always wanted to try some of their ale. I hear it's quite potent." Wynne says with delight. Maker! How can she even think about alcohol after last night? She seems unaware of what is going on around her or she doesn't care. For someone to complain about my hideous habits and filthy socks, she suddenly can endure a whole lot more stench and filth than she can around me.

The bar is crammed with dwarves. There's something like a small stage, consisting of a board resting on several barrels. On that stage there's a band and a fat dwarven woman wails at the top of her voice. It sounds as if someone is pulling her teeth out.

There's roaring laughter and shouts. Dwarves on benches and chairs and tables and under benches and chairs and tables. A pair of them is even sitting on the chandalier dangling from the ceiling. And they all sing along with the wailing woman.

"Is this some form of mass suicide?" Sten mumbles in pure blank horror. If he ever reports back to his Arishok the dwarves are due for an invasion.

The smell is... it's indescribable. I mean, my socks smell bad. Barkley smells bad. Foul eggs smell bad. Old fish smells bad. But this... this is worse. Far worse. There's a thick cloud of smoke rising from several pipes, it reeks of sweat and unwashed bodies, old and fresh vomit, of beer and cabbage. The mixture is making me gag. Rori is ashen. She'd probably leave again at once if she wasn't pushed forward by the crowd streaming in.

"Ugh!" Morrigan shudders. "Just... do not buy anything. Or touch anything. Or... sit anywhere."

Rori ignores Morrigan's advice and slumps down on a bench at a sticky looking table. "Bhelen, Harrowmont, how should I know who makes the better king?" Rori groans, banging her head at the tabletop repeatedly. When she sits up, she frowns and wipes her forehead. "What's that? It's... sticky... ewww..."

"Told you so," Morrigan mutters. She stands there, trying to avoid any contact with anything as she glares daggers at any dwarf daring to ogle her.

Rori orders Barkley to take care of her and the dog licks her face clean. Mental note to myself: Make sure to wash Rori's face with water before kissing her again.

"I neither know Bhelen nor Harrowmont. They don't even want to talk to me but want me to support them? I'm a Grey Warden, not a kingmaker."

"Well, you've done quite a lot already to make Alistair king," Leliana points out. She wipes the bench clean with her handkerchief and finds it gets stuck. So she just sits on the handkerchief.

"That's different. I know he would be a good king," Rori says firmly.

"I wish I had your confidence," I mumble.

"So, what do you know about dwarves?" Leliana inquires. She's the only one looking thoroughly pleased with the whole situation.

"They are small, live mostly underground, dig for lyrium in the Deep Roads and dwarven ale tastes like cat piss set on fire."

"I tried dwarven ale once." I pull a face at the memory. I got so violently sick I thought I would die.
Duncan just laughed and said it was the same for him when he had his first try. "I thought it was just something they tricked surfacers into drinking, as a joke."

"I once drank a thimble of dwarven ale," Leliana giggles and grimaces. "Woke up a week later in Jader wearing nothing but my shoes and a towel."

Zevran wiggles his eyebrows at her. "You don't happen to think about giving it another try, do you?" he purrs.

"No," Leliana says firmly.

"I've never tasted it," Rori admits. "Cat piss on fire, that's what Father told me. Maric used to carry around a flask with dwarven ale and sometimes he let others take a sip, mostly when things got tough."

"Do you know that dwarven ale isn't truly ale at all?" Zevran asks, while waving at the waitress. "And it's black. Marvelous!"

"Unless you don't want to have Bhelen and Harrowmont decide who should rule in a drinking contest, we can forget about that piece of information," Leliana sighs.

The waitress comes and takes our orders. When it's Rori's turn, she asks for a glass of water, causing the waitress to stare at her as if she ordered dragon blood on ice. "Please?" Rori groans - and finds herself sitting in front of a pint of firewater ten minutes later. "Maker! These dwarves try to kill me. They will prove more effective than the Antivan Crows if they go on like this."

"We have to make a plan." Leliana impatiently taps her fingers at the tabletop. "First, we have to find out as much as possible about Bhelen, Harrowmont and dwarven culture. We split up. Everybody takes a look around. Talk to people. Find out what they think about the candidates."

"And then?" Rori asks, sniffing testingly at the firewater.

"Then we decide who to support."

"And what if we later find out it was a bad choice?"

"As long as the king is not yet crowned, we can always switch loyalties."

"We can?"

"Of course sweetheart. People do that all the time. And we will have all the dirty information to blackmail them. It's the Game."

"And you know how to play it?"

Leliana smiles so sweetly, it makes me shudder. There's a wickedness in this smile I would have not expected to find in the shy Chantry sister. Eagerly she leans closer until we all stick our heads together. And in a hushed, excited whisper she begins to fill us in on her plan. "Listen..."

Half an hour later my head is spinning and I am utterly confused. "Am I the only one with a headache now?"

"No," Rori groans, returning to banging her head at the table. "This is worse than having to listen to Father explain Orlesian politics."

"Did you understand anything she said?" I ask hopefully.
"No. Did you?"

"Not at all."

"Don't worry, Roristair." Leliana pinches both mine and Rori's cheek. "Just do what I say and you'll be fine."

"Now," Rori remarks sourly. "I feel like a complete retard."
Rori is preparing for taking part in some pit fights in the Proving. I don't like this at all. To have to watch her getting into a fight without being able to help her just feels wrong. Yes, she can totally handle herself quite well. I still don't like seeing my girl getting beaten up.

"They don't kill each other in the arena, do they?" Wynne wonders, pacing the room worriedly. "I mean... why would anyone find that entertaining? Ugh."

Oh Maker! I for sure wouldn't find it entertaining. Certainly not if Rori was involved.

"That's not the intention, no, but it can happen of course," Dagna giddily explains. The little dwarven girl with her funny bouncing pigtails sits next to Rori on a bench and dangles her legs. Team Roristair met her as soon as we stumbled out of the tavern. She identified us as surfacers right away and recruited us for taking her request to study magic to the Circle. In return we got ourselves a dwarven guide. Dagna is as bouncy and boisterous as Rori. And as stubbornly determined in achieving her goals.


"I hear there are all kinds of rules that govern the Proving. They get very mad if you break the rules." Leliana points out. She's cutting an apple into tiny bits for her new pet. "It's to ensure nobody gets killed. Dwarves aren't monsters, you know."

"What are you worrying about?" Zevran asks while kneading Rori's shoulders, a massage he claims to be beneficial for her muscles. I think it's just an excuse to touch her and watch him with eagle eyes. "She knows some real nasty tricks - even more since she's been training with me. And she's tougher than she looks. She's going to kick ass down there. I'll make a bet on her, all the money I still got and if you want a piece of advice, my dear friend Alistair, you should do so as well." He pauses in thought, than adds in an equally cheerful tone: "'Hmm. I hear that if the spectators don't approve of a match's outcome, they rush the field and kill the fighters.'"

"They do WHAT?!!" I feel like fainting.

"Oh, don't worry, Rori will make it spectacular!" He ogles over Rori's shoulder, down her cleavage. "And if everything fails, she can just rip her blouse open. I'd pay to see that!"

"You know, I'm not sure whether I like having you talk about her like that," I grumble, pondering if I should smack the back of his head.

"Well, she has some pretty boobs. And you get to see them all for free. And you can squeeze them and suck her nipples and..."

"Merciful Andraste! Shut your filthy mouth, elf!" My cheeks are burning hot and red.

"Now, don't tell me you don't do that?"

"Err..." I am clearly tempted to shove Zevran into that pit.

"I'm right here, you know," Rori mumbles dreamily. She has her eyes closed, rolls her head from side to side and seems completely relaxed, humming softly - it's almost a purr.
"That massage... can you teach me how to do it?" I ask, making Zevran grin demonically at me.

"Of course, my dear friend," he purrs and I can't get rid of the feeling I doomed myself to endless suffering.

I tried to persuade... I frown, trying to remember who we actually side with in the Proving. "Do any of you know who Rori fights for?"

"No," Rori groans. "I'm totally lost. We switched allegiance once? Twice? I cannot remember. Ask Leliana, she would know." She frowns. "I hope she does know." She casts a glance at the young bard, sitting on a stone bench at the side of the room. She's hugging and feeding that ugly half-blind pig-rabbit Rori gave her.

"Ohhh, where's my cute little boy, where's my sweet darling Schmooples," Leliana coos, picking the ugly beast up and cuddling him like a baby. "There's my cutie-pie, my little cuddly Schmoople-Doople!" She showers the nug's snout with kisses.

Err...

"I've never thought one day I'd envy a nug," Zevran comments.

"And I'd never thought, anybody could have a worse taste than Rori," Morrigan snorts, looking pointedly at me. "On a second thought... the nug's not that bad."

Oh, that witch-bitch! I glare at her as piercingly as I can possibly manage. It should be scorching. I rake my eyes over her, trying to find something to pay her back, something that would trigger a retort that leaves her devastated.

"Have a care where your eyes linger, Alistair," Morrigan hisses, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Really, if she didn't want anybody to look at her, then she should put on some clothes!

By the way: Rori's breasts are more beautiful. And bigger.

"Yes, well don't worry. It's not what you think." I snort.

"I see," she huffs, clearly not believing anything I say. How vain to think any man would feel tempted to gawk at her.

"I was looking at your nose."

Morrigan's hand flies up to touch her nose warily. "And what is it about my nose that captivates you so?"

"I was just thinking that it looks exactly like your mother's," I pleasantly point out.

"I hate you so much." Morrigan hisses

"What?" Awww! Have I found a weak spot?

"Never mind," Morrigan grumbles. Turning away she begins to rummage in her backpack until she finds the golden framed mirror Rori has given her. She turns her head from side to side, examining her nose in the mirror.

Haha!

Rori asks me to help her with her armour. I wish, she'd wear something heavier - but she doesn't
have the strength for a full plate armour. Maker, she looks so fragile, so small, so young, so vulnerable... I don't want her to be hurt. Especially I don't like having to watch her amuse a horde of dwarves that cheer when she's under attack.

"Grey Wardens are not meant to take sides and get involved in politics," I sigh, rubbing my forehead. "Yet here we are."

"I don't really see how we should have not gotten involved," Rori replies. She tenderly cups my face in her hands, stroking her thumbs across my cheeks. "We need the dwarves but they aren't able to decide unless they have a king. So if we don't play kingmakers, we don't get their army and they bash their own heads in while the archdemon destroys Ferelden."

"I just wish, they let me fight," I grumble. But they won't. Whoever Rori is fighting for wants the leader of the Grey Wardens in his team - plus they all get totally excited about Rori because of the way she looks. Actually being defeated by a little ginger that looks like she couldn't handle the blades she's carrying is far more dishonouring than being beaten up by a broadshouldered - and ruggedly handsome - 6 ft ex-templar.

"I know," she whispers and tiptoes to brush her lips against mine. "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

That's what she probably has to tell herself. For me it will still be torture to be forced to watch her. I hug her to me, deepening the kiss, my tongue stroking hers, my heart beating in the same rhythm as hers. I don't want to let her go but I have to. Strange how much more concerned I am when I can't be with her. This shouldn't be any more dangerous than the fights we've been in before.

"You two make me sick," Morrigan snorts next to us, breaking my chain of thoughts, while Dagna squeals in delight, whispering to Leliana loud enough for everybody to hear how cute we are.

For Rori it's time to enter the fighting pit while the rest of us takes their seats amongst the assembled audience. Dwarven Provings are obviously big time public entertainment. There's whole families there with their kids and some of them have their favourite fighters and teams. There's fan helmets, fan armours, I almost get bashed my head in by a dwarven kid with his fan axe. Ale is sold and snacks, mostly something they call Hot Nug, a nug-meat sausage in a soft white bun with mustard, tomato sauce, fried and dried onions and pickled gherkins.

The crowd makes an awful noise with drums, bagpipes, horns or just by shouting and it's not any cleaner here than in the tavern. The seats are sticky, the floor is sticky, the dwarves are mostly drunk and their fan songs aren't any prettier than their drunken tavern singing. Probably because it's drunken, too.

Morrigan pulls a face and tries to wipe her seat next to me clean before she slumps down. The sour look on her face and the way she chews at her lip are a hint for her to begin to talk anytime soon. Today is not my lucky day. "You... do not truly think I look as my mother does, do you?" she finally blurts out, pressing her nose nervously.

"Have you really been thinking about that all this time?" I almost feel sorry for her. She sounds... feeble.

"I am simply curious." And there all feebleness is gone. Too bad. She's nicer when she's not herself.

"And not insecure in the slightest, I'm sure." I chuckle. Now, this is great, isn't it? The ice princess does have a weak spot. And she's quite vain.

"I think I look nothing like her." Morrigan says defiantly, sounding like a three year old.
"I don't know. Give it a few hundred years and it'll be a spot-on match," I tease while I try to ignore the dwarf that is showering me from behind with ale whenever he jumps from his seat and shouts at the fighters.

"I said that I look nothing like her!" she spits in my face like a venomous viper.

Whoa. I am applying for frog-time if I don't watch out. "All right. Got it. Totally different. I see that now."

It's Rori's turn now. She walks into the pit hesitantly first, then straightening she holds her head up high and her stride becomes more confident. She still has no warrior stance but moves gracefully like a dancer with her hips swaying with every step. Her leather armour clings to her like a second skin, showing of her curves. And she doesn't wear her helmet - I am so going to spank her for that! - , her curly crimson hair's only held back by a simple hairband.

I really shouldn't be surprised she's greeted by wolf whistles that soon turn into a chorus of leering drunken dwarves shouting: "Undress! Undress!"

Ha! You can shout all you want. She'll undress for me alone. I have to admit, I'd not have thought other men lusting after my woman could prove to be such an enormous boost for my manliness. Especially since I know there's not the slightest chance they'll ever get even close to her. At the same time I feel offended that they wouldn't respect her but treat her like a cheap whore.

"Ah, the highlight of underground existence, I take it." Morrigan next to me comments sarcastically. For once I have to agree with her.

The shouting and whistling stops when Rori is introduced as a Grey Warden. They might not respect her as a woman, but a Grey Warden, that's something. Even her opponents stop acting as if she was easy prey. You can see it in their stance, the way they watch her, squinting their eyes as if they could see behind the deceiving looks of the lithe woman in front of them.

"I thought their warriors, at least, would be bigger." Sten mumbles in between Hot Nug No. 5 and Hot Nug No. 6.

I am glad they aren't any bigger. They are down there with my kitten and she's not exactly big herself.

The fight begins and those dwarves for sure don't mean to play. Rori is faster and more dexterous and Zevran indeed has taught her some nasty tricks.

"Maker watch over her!" I breathe when she's pushed down by a dwarf wielding a shield. He slams his axe down right next to her head. I leap from my seat and start to climb over the balustrade. Andraste's flaming sword! I am not going to just sit here and watch her getting accidentally decapitated! A huge strong hand clamps down on my shoulder and shoves me back onto the bench.

"Have faith in her," Sten rumbles, his hand still on my shoulder.

"You are one to talk! You keep questioning every decision she makes!" And I am to watch her being picked apart? No way! I struggle to get out of Sten's grip, but he won't let go.

"I admit, understanding the human way of... thinking is sometimes hard." That's as much as Sten is willing to say. In the meantime Rori has knocked out her opponent all on her own and is rewarded with thundering applause.

We all jump from our seats and stumble over each other to hurry down to the room Rori has been
assigned to. Wynne mends her together as good as she can, Zevran mutters advices and I just want to hold her tight and never let go again. And of course I put that helmet onto her head.

"Wear that!" I snap at her when she attempts to take it off again. "Don't you dare and take it off. You are already in for some spanking for not wearing it in the first fight."

"Ohhhh..." she breathes, her eyes growing wide. She walks back into the pit with a rather exaggerated sway of her hips, shooting a look at me over her shoulder that gives me a whole lot more ideas what to do with her when alone. Maker, I haven't made love to her for the last six days and my body is aching for her.

"Did you just say, you are going to spank her?" Zevran whispers next to my ear, making me jump. The way I blush a deeper shade of scarlet and start to stammer excuses that only get me dug in deeper, causes the elf to chuckle. "Alistair, Alistair, me dear friend, still waters run deep. I am thoroughly impressed. She likes it, doesn't she? Likes it rough and hard? Oh, I have a few things in mind you might want to try with her..."

"Andraste's flaming sword! Leave me alone, you deviant bastard!" I grumble.

Zevran bursts into laughter. "I am not the only deviant bastard around here, my friend." He pats my shoulder as we hurry back to our seats just in time to witness Rori's entry. She has taken the helmet off. I might get back to Zevran's offer and see what other things he has in store to punish that stubborn nuisance of a woman.

"Hey, that's not fair! Two against one!" I shout when Rori's new opponents are introduced. They look mean. And they fight mean.

"Twins count as one," Dagna explains. The logic is lost to me. It's just unfair.

Next to me Zevran bites his fingernails nervously, Wynne keeps hiding behind her scarf whenever it gets tough for Rori. Dagna and Leliana hug each other so tightly, they are going to squeeze poor Schmoooples to nug-squish if they don't watch out. Only Sten and Shale seem unperturbed.

"What do they have to prove? They’re all soft, filthy things that are going to die." Shale murmurs, its voice rumbling loud enough to be heard over the excited shouting of the crowd.

"It's Rori down there," I snap at the golem and it has the decency to at least look guilty.

Rori has trouble with the twins. They attack from both sides with Rori dancing out of their way whenever they close in. She's looking for a gap in their defense, knowing well, her blow has to knock out at least one of them so that she has time to deal with the other. She prances around them, then when one of the dwarves lunges forward, Rori pirouettes, coming back to chest with the dwarf. Grabbing his sword arm and pulling him forward, she uses his own momentum to run his sister through. While the dwarf is still too shocked to actually comprehend what has happened, Rori smashes her elbow in his face, kicks his feet from under him and knocks him out with the hilt of her sword.

I am so upset and nervous, wincing every time a blow hits home and Rori stumbles or falls down. When someone's hand squeezes mine, I thankfully hold on to it until the fight is over and Rori is still alive and well enough to limp out of the pit on her own. When I finally look down, I find it's Morrigan's and my hand intertwined.

With a startled cry, we both let go of each other and wipe our hands at our pants in utter disgust.

"Don't do that again!" Morrigan hisses at me.
"What? I didn't do anything! You grabbed my hand!"

"Keep dreaming! I'd not touch you with pincers if my life depended on it."

"You'd grab anything and anybody to save your miserable life," I snap. Morrigan and all her survival
of the fittest crap, she'd sell her soul and more.

"I hope this will be over soon," Rori groans, while Wynne heals her broken arm. She leans her head
against my chest, trying to suppress her whimpers but fails and in the end gives in to sobbing.

That's it. I'm off to talk to the Proving Master. "I'll go in for her next time," I inform him without as
much as a greeting or an introduction. He knows me anyway, not that many humans running around
here.

"You can't, lad. She is the chosen fighter. It would be a great honour loss if she gave up. The
allegiance you wish to forge won't happen if she is looked upon as a coward."

"But..." This is tearing me appart.

"She is doing fine." The Proving Master assures me. "The audience loves her." Yeah, instead of
telling her to undress, they now shout her name, making it sound like "ROARRRRRI!".

"They just broke her arm!"

"She's your gal?" I nod and the Proving Master pats my arm sympathetically. "Tough little spitfire,
that's what she is. Don't worry too much. I doubt she will be permanently damaged."

And that is supposed to make me feel any better?

Sten comes to get me. "She is a warrior," he says as if that changed everything. This is also not
making me feel any better.

The next fights I watch in horror. I can hardly watch at all, covering my eyes with my hands most of
the time. Zevran clings to me so tightly that he almost crawls into my lap. Morrigan's high pitched
screams are for sure going to have my ears ringing for days.

"Bloody blasted asshat! That was an awful foul!" Wynne curses like a sailor, Leliana and Dagna are
white as freshly bleached linen and even Sten has begun to chew his fingernails - although he keeps
acting as if he doesn't and puts on a stern expression whenever he feels me watching him. Shale
shouts threats at the fighters until security appears and throws it out - well, they attempt to throw it
out. Shale picks one of them up and throws him into the crowd. He knocks down a quite familiar
looking redhaired dwarf. Five minutes later the whole block has started a brawl and we are all
thrown out. Now we can't even watch Rori anymore but are reduced to listening to the shouts from
the pit and the audience's reaction. They have by now invented some choruses and chants.

Such as...

"COME ON ROARRRRRI KICK SOME ASS, KICK SOME ASS, KICK SOME Ah-Ah-
ASS!"

Yeah, I know, it's not the epitome of romantic poetry.

Roared by several hundred dwarves this certainly sounds impressive, still I pace the room, feeling
awfully sick and torn. I am so relieved when in her last fight she's allowed to choose a companion
and picks me. We've been training a lot together with Sten and Zevran as our coaches. The way we
work together is much more than just acting as a team. Zevran calls it a choreography.

Despite that Zevran advises Rori to pick Morrigan - and then advises Morrigan to let her boobs slip out of that little bit of cloth she wears - just for the show. She bangs him over the head with her staff in reply.

Rori and I both walk into the pit and are greeted by the excited shouts and roars of the crowd. They whistle and stomp their feet. The fight is tough but Rori has won the crowd's favour and one can see how much her opponents are bothered by this. They are angry and keep insulting us. I figure quickly that wearing a helmet is hindering my sight when fighting someone hardly reaching above my waist. Seems that means, I can't spank Rori for not wearing hers - well, I'll just find another excuse. Or I just do it for fun.

Maker! Listen to me! I'm here in the middle of a fight, fantasizing about smacking my girl's ass! What in the name of the Maker has happened to me that I even consider this fun?

"Alistair! Watch out!" Rori cries and I tear my eyes away from her just in time to dodge and block an attack aimed to pierce through one of the weak spots of my armour. I really should be paying more attention.

In the end we win. Rori takes my hand, raising her arm - and mine - in a gesture of victory. Then we both bow. And then she kisses me Rori-style in front of several hundred cheering dwarves. She certainly knows how to make quite an impression. If she goes on like that we can crown her queen and forget about Harrowmont and Behlen altogether.
Includes spoilers from the novel The Calling.

I always wondered why templar-vow-less Alistair would have taken lyrium when Cullen claims a templar first takes lyrium after completing his vows. I tried to find a possible explanation.

When walking in a shabby, gloomy area inhabited by seedy and dubious characters you just should keep walking and leave as quickly as possible. What you shouldn't do is, enter a dark alley with even darker corners when one of these seedy and dubious characters goes "Shush!" as soon as they see you and then beckons you to follow them. This is always a really, really bad idea. I mean, selfpreservation just screams at any person with as much as a thimble of common sense to ignore that person and move on.

And what does our fearless leader do?

She walks over there for having a chat with the seedy and dubious characters and we can all be glad they didn't plan to murder us on the spot but need some lyrium smugglers that can actually leave Orzammar at the moment.

"So, let me get this straight: we take some amount of a yet unnamed substance to a yet unnamed place and sell it to a yet unnamed person with a bonus for ourselves from the purchaser and one more from you when we return with the next order?" Rori summarizes the whole very dubious affair. I've been trying to pull her away by her elbow several times but she shook me off, ignoring any attempt to stop her from doing something highly illegal and totally wrong.

She chews on her lower lip and frowns thoughtfully. "How about gaining some new customers?" she asks the seedy and dubious dwarf.

"Oh, hey, wait! May I have a word with you, Rori? Now!" This time I don't let her push me away but drag her along until we are out of earshot. "What in the name of the Maker do you think you are doing there, Rori Cousland?" I snap, feeling tempted to throttle her, when she just looks at me with that sheepish grin and her eyes all round and wide and innocent. The little girl act, oh I am so not fooled! "You cannot smuggle lyrium! It's illegal! Do you actually realize what they will do with us if we get caught?"

"If we get caught, smuggling lyrium won't be our biggest problem," Rori points out. "We are wanted for murdering King Cailan."

"But we are innocent!"

Rori snorts, crossing her arms in front of her chest defiantly. "Tell that to the hangman."

"Don't we have other things to do? Like ending the Blight? We don't have time for big deal lyrium smuggling."

"Avernus needs lyrium for his research. If we don't want to rob Chantries and steal from templars,
we have to buy it from smugglers. So why not make our own deal?"

Ahh, I tend to forget about that crazy old mage and his research. A research Rori believes in - whatever she hopes to achieve that way. I am beginning to realize she won't just sit down and accept her lot as a Grey Warden. I recall what Duncan told me about her father, how Bryce Cousland with his dying breath told his daughter that she will live and change the world. I wonder if he knew what she is capable of.

"Rori, this is wrong!" I do not often get into a fight with Rori, but sometimes her moral aspects are more flexible than mine. I know what lyrium can do. I took it if only for a short time. It is highly addictive. Usually templars only take their first sip of lyrium after completing their vows. I never took my vows but still I took lyrium. I suspect they gave it to me because I clearly showed, I did not want to become a templar. When my Knight-Commander gave me that small vial, ordering me to drink it, I did because that's what soldiers do, following orders. It still felt awfully wrong. I believe they gave the lyrium to me to tie me to the order through my addiction. Well, it didn't work. Still, lyrium to me is like a red rag to the bull.

"Why? We don't sell it to addicts. We do not hurt anybody. We use the lyrium for research that can help the Grey Wardens," Rori says stubbornly. She knows how I feel about lyrium, still she would act as a smuggler to make her deal.

"What do you think will happen to the lyrium he asks you to smuggle before you can make your deal for Avernus? That will be sold to addicts and if they blow up their minds, it will be your responsibility." I am so angry with her I don't even notice I shove her against the wall until she shoves back.

"Don't you shove me around, Alistair," she hisses like a cat.

"Can't you see what you are doing? Risking lives for a research? A research that could blow up Warden's Peak and everybody and their dog happening to be there." We just should leave it like it is. Like Grey Wardens have left it ever since the order was founded almost 1000 years ago. We know absolutely nothing about the secrets of the order, about the darkspawn or the Deep Roads, about Blights and the archdemons. And she wants to mess around with all that?

"Avernus didn't blow up the keep during the last two hundred years, I very much doubt he will now. And as for the smuggling, I will try to make the deal without having to make the delivery. But if I can't convince the dwarf to do business with me without smuggling for him first, then that's what I will do. Once." Thus said she turns away from me, leaving me standing there while she makes her deal. I inhale deeply and fantasize about spanking her real hard for this. Stubborn little beast. Ruthless, that's what she is - well, sometimes. Maybe that's what makes her outstanding. Her determination and the willingness to do what she has to do to get what she wants. I just hope she will know when to draw a line.

So with the lyrium in Rori's backpack we're on our way back to the surface and the Circle.

For the next two days we hardly talk to each other. I am mad at her. Truly mad. So mad that I make her put up her own tent and sleep alone at night. She walks away crying, and it cuts my heart like a hot knife. One with edges and spikes that gets twisted and turned once thrust into the wound. The first night I hardly sleep and when I do, I toss and turn and the nightmares tear at my mind. I am tempted to crawl out of my tent and go to her, but I can't just give in like that. I miss her like crazy when she's only in her tent across the camp - or right in front of my tent, according to the shadow that is cast at the tarpaulin. I watch her shadow, how she paces, how she turns away and returns, her hesitation, the way she hugs herself, how she slumps her shoulders and shakes her head, how her whole body tells about the turmoil inside of her. But then she makes up her mind and leaves,
shattering my hopes and hers.

The next day is the very same. My morning ritual takes place without Rori and I cannot stand it any longer to be cut off her. Morrigan's snappish remarks don't make it any better. She's completely gleeful about how devastated I am. After a second night without Rori I decide I don't care that much about the lyrium and the people who could buy it. I cannot endure this anymore. I crawl out of my tent at the break of dawn, determined to make up with Rori. To find her standing right in front of my tent, her eyes all puffed and red, her nose snotty, trails of tears smeared across her cheeks, that sight leaves me speechless.

She only wears one of my shirts and her boots, shivering in the cold, snowflakes glittering in her bright red hair in the glow of the campfire. "I'm sorry," she breathes, her lips quivering as if she is about to burst into tears again, while I only stand there like a fool and gawk. "You were right. To deliver the lyrium to the dealer is wrong." A dealer located at Kinloch Hold, so he's either a mage or a templar, and we both know who that one will sell the lyrium to. "So I will not make this delivery."

Did I wash my ears this morning? Because I think I must have misunderstood. I stand there and stare and blink while Rori timidly glances at me, looking small and vulnerable the way she hugs herself. "But what about your deal? What about the lyrium for Avernus?" This is so important to her. She believes in Avernus. She believes in what he can do for the Grey Wardens - and more important for herself - and for me.

"Well, I got the package that was meant for Kinloch Hold. That should do for a while until I find a way to provide Avernus with more lyrium. The end doesn't justify the means. You were right about that. And I guess, I have to thank you for making me realize what I was about to do is wrong."

"Oh Rori..." It feels as if a heavy weight has been lifted of my shoulders.

"Can you... can you forgive me?" she asks meekly, a startled gasp following her question when I pull her into my arms and kiss her fiercely. She's so taken by surprise, she completely forgets to kiss me back until I coax her to open her mouth to me. Then she responds - and oh how she responds! Shortly afterwards we both tumble back into my tent and I quickly find out she doesn't wear any smallclothes.

I missed her so much, it felt like starving slowly. Seems she is equally hungry, as we don't even bother getting out of our clothes. Her skilled fingers pull my breeches open while I push her to lie on the furs and blankets, making her spread her legs for me. There's not much tenderness, no time wasted when the urge to satisfy our needs is so overwhelming. It's all fierce kisses and nails raked down my back, tearing blood, love bites and the uncontrolled noises of pleasure that accompany our rough love making. She'll be sore afterwards. And the scratches on my back will burn for at least two days. Who cares? She's here back with me and that's all that counts.

"Merciful Andraste! Thank the Maker, they have made up!" Wynne's voice breaks the silence that follows our roaring climaxes.

"There's no living with them if they don't romp at least once a day," Leliana agrees from the other side of the camp.

"Ahh, there's nothing like good, wild make-up-sex," Zevran purrs in his heavy accent.

"And there I thought I'd get some undisturbed sleep, but no! She had to let that fool back into her bed," Morrigan groans.

Having collapsed on top of Rori, my face pressed at the crook of her neck, I smile against her sweaty
skin. My heart is pounding heavily in my chest, my blood is soaring through my veins, my nerves are tingling and my breathing is too ragged for speaking. I feel so alive.

"I missed you," Rori mumbles, nuzzling my neck before she kisses my chin, then my lips and the tip of my nose softly.

"I missed you, too," I whisper. And then I make sure we catch up on all the other things we missed, mostly those that require a horizontal position. That day we only leave camp around midday.

Our candidate for becoming king of Orzammar wants us to enter the Deep Roads to search for Paragon Branka. We know less about the Deep Roads and the darkspawn than a dwarven toddler but we for sure got that much: You do not go down there without a thorough preparation. I mean, Rori, Barkley and I are the only Grey Wardens and thus the only ones immune against the taint. The others... they are risking to be infected and that means a certain death - or becoming a ghoul. And then we would have to bash their heads in.

"There's a recipe in my mother's grimoire that could help us," Morrigan offers. She's not too fond about going into the Deep Roads but she pulls herself together. Orzammar already had a very bad effect on her mood. There's no living with her anyway, but underground she's just a complete pest.

"I recall, twenty years ago a group of Grey Wardens came to the tower," Wynne says. She knits a pullover for Schmooples while she rides. Nugs obviously aren't made for Ferelden autumns and Leliana has to wrap the ugly beast into her coat to keep him from freezing to death. Unfortunately Schmooples isn't yet housebroken. "The First Enchanter presented some potions to King Maric, as he was travelling with the Grey Wardens. He said it would protect him from the taint."

I almost fall off my horse at that piece of information. "Maric went into the Deep Roads with a group of Grey Wardens?" I exclaim. "And you never thought about telling me?" I cannot believe she kept that to herself.

"That was twenty years ago, son. I only just remembered. I am an old woman after all." Wynne sourly remarks. "You can be glad I remember at all." She frowns at her knitting. "Oh, look here, now I missed a loop!" She falls silent while repairing the mess she claims is all my fault by startling her. I am busy digesting the information she just gave me.

Twenty years ago. I've heard that before. Just where? Some noble man mentioning Maric went missing and how Loghain searched for him twenty years ago.

I am going to be twenty next week. Coincidence?

I exchange a look with Rori and the way she frowns she's already doing the math as well.

"Duncan was there, too," Wynne suddenly goes on as if she was talking about the weather. "But he was a very young man then. Not older than you are now, Alistair. I hardly recognized him when I met him at Ostagar. He wasn't introduced by name. I just remembered him because he was such a dark skinned, handsome young fellow. And I saw him sneaking out of the hall while the First Enchanter held his very very long and very very boring speech. I swear, King Maric almost nodded off several times." She chuckles at the memory.

"Who else was there?" Rori asks.

"Oh, lets see... I cannot recall them all, I'm afraid. I remember their leader, a strong and tall woman with short white hair. They had a dog just like Barkley. And an elven mage. She was tiny.... And two very handsome knights..."
"What about names? Do you remember any names?" I press her. I cannot believe Duncan never told me anything about that. He knew Maric was my father. I cannot believe he never said a word! Why would he keep this a secret? Or did he simply not think about it? How could he possibly not remember this when I was a constant reminder of Maric?

My thoughts are turning in circles, running wild like ants in an anthill. I almost miss Wynne's answer while I try to figure out what is going on and why nobody ever feels like telling me anything of importance!

"No, son, I don't. But there should be a record. If the First Enchanter kept one at all. I mean, with the whole chaos that took place a few weeks later and the Fereldan army arriving at the tower..."

"What? Army? Chaos? What in the name of the Maker are you talking about?"

"I really don't know, Alistair." Wynne rubs her temples tiredly as she tries to force the memories to the surface. "They didn't tell us anything. The First Enchanter was replaced, that's all I know. But why and how and where he went - well, there were a whole lot of rumours. Some said it was an Orlesian intrigue, some said the darkspawn invaded the tower, some said the First Enchanter was made tranquil. I really don't know what truly happened."

The wind whips snowflakes around, making it hard to see where we're going and even harder to talk. We fall silent, which is okay for me because I'm brooding. Not that I am any smarter at the end of the day.

A few days later we arrive in time at Kinloch Hold to witness Cullen and Carroll hauling around a bundle of a man with a sack over his head, his wrists bound behind his back and his ankles tied together. He struggles against the templars who grunt and curse as they try to get the mage into the boat.

"Anders!" Cullen snaps exasperatedly. "Stop kicking! We'll drop you into the lake if you don't keep still!"

"And I won't go after you," Carroll informs him.

"Typical! Templars threatening a mage to drown him! Now, that's how you pretend to protect us?" comes a muffled voice from within the sack.

"I meant an accident, not a threat!" Cullen growls, trying to grip the struggling mage harder. He squirms like a worm and in the end Cullen and Carroll have to put him down. Both sweat heavily.

"Of course you'd claim it to be an accident!" the mage wails, wiggling around on the ground. "None of you would ever admit they committed murder!"

Cullen wipes his brow, frowning when spotting us. "You haven't come to recruit this one as well, have you?" he greets us.

"Then we at least would get rid of him," Carroll snorts. "They should make this one tranquil."

"NO!" the mage wails, squirming even more now. If he doesn't watch out, he'll fall into the lake.

"Shut up!" Carroll snarls and kicks the mage's head full force with his foot - a foot in a heavy boot.

"Carroll!" Cullen shouts, yanking his fellow templar away from the now very still mage, before Carroll can kick him again. "Are you nuts?" Cullen kneels next to the mage, pulling at the sack that is quickly soaked with bright crimson. "Oh Maker!" The mage's face is ashen. It's a young, badly
shaved man with dark blonde hair, a golden earring and a heavily bleeding laceration at his forehead. "Blast!" Cullen curses, pressing the sack to the wound to stop the bleeding.

"Let me take a look at him." Wynne steps forward and Cullen gladly lets her take over.

"What did you think you were doing?" the templar snaps at his companion, fists clenched and anger hardly suppressed.

Carroll just shrugs. "One mage less. Who cares? He's trouble, I tell you. This is the third time he ran away. Why the Knight-Commander doesn't have him made tranquil or executed is beyond me. I tell you, one day this asshole of a mage will be far more trouble than he is worth. I say, drop him into the lake when we're right in the middle. Say he fought back. Say we couldn't hold him. Problem solved."

Cullen clearly struggles with himself. Anders sounds quite like a pest - from a templar's point of view. They teach them better to be careful, better one or two tranquils more than a mage that is a possible threat. Mages who run away are a threat. So Carroll isn't altogether wrong. But killing a mage just like that, it's murder. I don't know Cullen well, but what I got to know of him, he became a templar because he believes in what they do. He wants to protect. And that means protecting the mages as much as any other human being. Cullen's faith has been tested lately when the mages ran amok in the Circle. I totally understand, he's having a very hard time, deciding what is right and what is wrong.

"Carroll, you return to the Circle. I take care of Anders," Cullen finally says, glowering at his fellow templar. Carroll opens his mouth to protest, then shrugs and climbs into the boat, leaving Cullen back at the shore with us and the injured mage.

Connor will be brought to Kinloch Hold once the Circle has recovered from the rebellion. Templars like Carroll make me cringe. To imagine Connor could be at Carroll's mercy - it's nothing that I want to happen to the boy. He has suffered enough. For the rest of his life he will carry the weight of his guilt and remember the ones his weakness has killed. But he is only a little boy and nobody protected him from what he is capable of as a mage. Could one really blame him?

"You need a hand with that mage?" I offer, feeling sympathy for Cullen.

"Now he is unconscious, he shouldn't be that big a problem," Cullen sighs tiredly. He looks as if he doesn't get much sleep lately. "You don't want to recruit him? No? I am relieved to see, you got at least some common sense."

I help Cullen anyway, carrying Anders to another boat. It's far gentler than hauling him over a shoulder. Morrigan meanwhile glares daggers at both me and Cullen. He is bound to notice her and with her staff she's easily identified as a mage.

"And who would you be?" he asks tiredly.

"A Grey Warden recruit," Rori prompts before Morrigan can say something stupid. And according to her sneer she was just about to dig her own grave. Too bad Rori saved her.

Cullen quirks an eyebrow but seems almost relieved that Morrigan is not yet another problem he has to deal with. "You recruit far too many mages," is all he mutters. Rori shrugs and offers a sheepish grin that Cullen just answers with an exasperated groan. He closes his eyes exhaustedly and rubs the back of his neck.

While the others load the ferry with our belongings and Shale stomps off to wade through the lake,
Cullen and I row the boat with Anders back to the tower. Morrigan certainly will have something to say about me helping the templar, but I couldn't care less.

"Can I ask a favour of you?" I begin once we are out of earshot. I row while Cullen keeps watch over Anders.

"What kind of favour would that be, your Highness?" The templar is wary. He probably thinks about Rori and her habit of recruiting dangerous mages.

I ignore the fact that I am being called 'Your Highness' again. People keep ignoring me anyway when I tell them not to. "There's a boy, about ten years old. His name is Connor. He will be taken to the Circle soon - and... I'd like you to watch over him."

"I'm a templar, that includes watching over mages. You should know that, your Highness."

"Yes, but... there's templars like you or Knight-Commander Greagoir and there's templars like... Carroll."

"After what happened in the Circle our nerves are on edge," Cullen says carefully, shifting on his seat uncomfortably. He would defend his fellow templar but I think, he gets what I mean. "Why is this boy so special to you?"

"He's Arl Eamon's son. Eamon raised me. I owe his family."

"The possessed boy from Redcliffe? They say he got cured." The way Cullen's jaws firmly clench, that haunted look in his eyes give away he's not convinced. Not at all.

"A mage entered the Fade and fought the demon. It's positive Connor is not possessed anymore."

Cullen snorts. I guess, if I had been in his place I'd rather get rid of any abomination or ex-abomination at once just to make sure. "So you want a special treatment for him after all he did because of what? Because he is the son of an Arl?" Not too fond of the nobility, is he? Well, I can't blame him. There's a lot of noble snobs out there who are everything but noble in their deeds. But it is neither Connor's fault that he was born noble nor that he was born a mage.

"Cullen, he's only a child. He didn't mean to cause any harm."

"And yet he killed so many." The templar is merciless in his judgement. He probably has to be. I'm so glad this is not my burden. Darkspawn isn't likely to earn my sympathy.

"It will haunt him forever. Cullen, please, this will be hard for Connor anyway. He's afraid. He'll be forced to leave home." Leaving home. I know how that feels. Even if it's only a home one imagined. It is tough for a child.

"Like any other mage," Cullen says forcefully.

"Don't you think this is horrible?"

Cullen by now is as exasperated with me as I am with him. "You've seen what this boy is capable of. He has to be controlled and watched."

"I know! Still, he has my sympathy."

Cullen groans and tiredly rubs the back of his neck. The wind is icy, tearing at our capes, snowflakes biting the exposed skin of our faces. The templar shrugs out of his cape to cover the still unconscious
mage with it. "Alright. I will look after that boy, make sure he's not bullied," Cullen finally agrees.

"Thank you, Ser."

Cullen grunts, seeming annoyed with himself to have actually agreed to my request. "You would have sucked as a templar, your Highness."
On Rori's advice Morrigan leaves Flemeth's grimoire back at our rooms at the Spoiled Princess. Carrying around a strange looking grimoire when entering a tower crammed with templars is not the brightest idea one can have. And this book is real strange. That leather it's bound in. Even Zevran doesn't know what it is and he has a leather fetish - his words, not mine. I don't even know what a fetish is and considering Zevran's expression I didn't dare to ask. And that tree on the cover. Beautiful, but mostly creepy in a way that makes me shudder. Much like Morrigan herself. So all Morrigan has when following Wynne and two templars into the laboratory is a note, translated from Flemeth's cypher. As Greagoir has Irving check on her recipe, her decision not to bring the grimoire proves wise.

While Wynne and Morrigan prepare our potions, I try to get any information about Maric and the Grey Wardens. It's a rather tiresome task as I have to worm everything out of Irving and in the end only learn that the reports about the whole affair are kept shut away by both the Chantry's and Maric's order.

"I am sorry, your Highness," Irving sighs, noticing my frustration. "If you were king..."

Wow. I never thought I would ever regret not being king. But in this very moment I truly wish I was. I don't really know what I hope to find - but Maric and Duncan and some other Grey Wardens and all that twenty years ago. I mean, I'd have to be the fool Morrigan claims I am to not want to look into that.

At least Dagna gets her allowance to study at the Circle. She'll be so delighted. I can already hear her squeal and see her bounce and pounce everybody and their dog.

None the wiser I follow Rori and Cullen to pay Jowan a visit. Well, us Grey Wardens pay our recruit a visit. Cullen is there to show us the way, make sure we don't get lost and don't do something extremely stupid and/or dangerous. And as he is already descending to the dungeons anyway, Greagoir has also loaded him with the task of shutting Anders away. The mage has recovered and rants, snarls and complains all the way down, down, down until Cullen shoves him into a cell and slams the door shut behind him. He looks as if he gladly threw the key away.

It is dark down here and moist. The constant dripping of water is the only sound next to occasionally distant and muffled noises that appear to be... human.

"Err," Rori begins, after taking in the surroundings. "I remember saying something about not locking Jowan away under unhuman conditions..." She glares pointedly at Cullen, arms akimbo and ready to start an argument. She clearly isn't going to back down on that matter.

"You didn't believe, we'd let him run around free, did you? He still is a blood mage." Cullen just walks around Rori and opens a heavy wooden door that leads down another dark corridor just broad enough for walking in single row.

At the right side the corridor is lined with cells that offer little privacy as they resemble cages with bars instead of concealed rooms. At least each of these cells has a tiny window close to the ceiling and thus out of reach. As tiny as it is, that bit of daylight takes away some of the gloom and darkness. Jowan is one of the inhabitants, occupying the very first cell. It's quite obvious he's better off than the other mages down here. He's allowed his own lantern, sitting on a desk loaded with several books. He has a narrow bed with several blankets, a bowl with fresh water that sits on a stool and the bucket in the corner of the cell obviously gets emptied frequently. This is the suite version of a dungeon cell.
Jowan knows and despite the still poor conditions, he is full of gratitude and regret. He's so eager to become a Grey Warden and help wherever he can, if he had a tail he'd wag it. In case he survives the Joining, Jowan is willing to make up for everything he did. He so desperately wants to finally do something right, I just hope he and Avernus don't get too excited about the possibilities their magic gives them.

We stay for the night, so there's another of these awkward silent dinners taking place with only the guests and their hosts on the dais having the permission to speak.

Rori in a hushed whisper has an argument with Cullen about the Rite of Tranquility. The tranquils serving the food give her the creeps. Whenever they smile their fake smiles at her, she looks at them with unmasked horror and sympathy in her eyes and shudders at the monotony of their voices. The templars are bound to notice how uncomfortable she is around the tranquils. And they certainly have no interest in her reflecting the fears of many mages. Greagoir beckons the tranquils to stay away and after a while Rori probably would have calmed down - if not for Ser Cullen forcing Rori to start a debate on principles – much to his Knight-Commander's dismay.

“They do not suffer, you know,” Cullen whispers, scowling at Rori as if she had personally insulted him. “I tell you, they do not suffer.”

“How do you know?” Rori snaps.

“You can ask them.” From across the table Greagoir beckons Cullen to end the conversation but the templar doesn't notice. He keeps staring Rori down with little success. Rori is as stubborn as a Storm Coast ram and to challenge her will lead to her butting heads. I really don't know what Cullen thinks he is doing. This is a very dangerous topic to discuss here.

“They have been cut off their emotions, of course they would not feel anything!” Rori is so agitated, she hardly cares anymore to stay quiet. I squeeze her hand to make her look at me and nod at the assembled mages to remind her of our surroundings. “It still is horrible,” she breathes, forcing herself rather unsuccessfully to appear calmer. “They are mere shadows of their former selves.”

"They are still alive,” Cullen argues. His jaws firmly clenched, he presses every word through gritted teeth. “If you had to choose, wouldn't you rather live than die even at that cost?"

"No," Rori says forcefully. "What kind of life would that be? Everything I am would be gone. It wouldn't be a life but a mere and very miserable existence."

"But you wouldn't know that," I point out, taking the templar's side. “As long as there is no different way to deal with dangerous mages, the Rite of Tranquility is the best option to keep mages under control without killing them."

“Has anybody ever even tried to find a better solution?” Rori inquires stubbornly. It's almost blasphemic and the way Greagoir glares at her, she is about to get banned from the Circle for the rest of her life. Just she couldn't care less. She glares back defiantly and I guess, we all can be glad she doesn't poke her tongue out at him. "What about you?" She turns back to me. “Could you endure meeting me every day if I was made tranquil?"

“Rori, nobody ever will make you tranquil!” I groan. “This is a hypothetical question and I refuse to answer it.”

“Don't you have any imagination, Alistair?” She totally ignores my demur or the fact that the templars patrolling the room nervously glance at their Knight-Commander while they suffocate any banter amongst the mages at once and with zero tolerance. “Could you endure that bright fake smile I
would wear? The monotony in my voice, the absence of my laughter, the way I'd look at you without any recognition of what I felt before?"

“I... I... “ The mere thought is making my heart constrict painfully. I keep having nightmares about Rori's death, dreams that feel so excruciatingly real, it's a torment. Even my memories of Ostagar or the darkspawn connection doesn’t cause images as agonizing to twist my mind. But it's only dreams and when I wake screaming, she is there with me and I find the horror is not real. To imagine she could be tranquil... that sounds like an endless nightmare, one I would never wake from, one she would never wake from.

With each of her words hauled at me, Cullen visibly crumbles. He clutches the edge of the table for support, his face is ashen and his breathing harsh. Rori and I exchange a puzzled look. Cullen seems like a man almost breaking down under a heavy weight. It's only but a short moment before he steels himself, straightens and the pained expression is replaced by an unmoved mask.

“This is just mean, Rori!” I mumble, shaking my head at her when she is about to press Cullen about what has just transpired. His loss of composure has gone unnoticed by the other templars as Zevran is giving a detailed and shockingly explicit description of a night he claims to have spent with two women at one time! “Nothing like that will... err... ever happen,” I say, already distracted by Zevran's tale. He has not really watched how the girls pleased each other with their tongues... has he? I mean... Blast, it's hot in here... I hear Rori's voice but I just cannot listen... they did what with that rod? Maker's Breath!

“Al...” Rori pokes my side.

“Err...” I snap out of my leering stupor, blushing a deeper shade of pink when she quirks an eyebrow at me, making me squirm and grin like the fool I am. A drooling fool with a whole lot of very dirty and sinful images running wild in my mind. There's such a huge lump in my throat, I can hardly swallow. And it takes me a while to kick my brain and tongue into cooperating to form a coherent sentence. “If you go on like that Greagoir will dump us into the lake and have us swim back to the shore.” At least the icy water would be a rather welcomed cool down.

Zevran, still either totally unaware of how his voice rings in the silence of the great hall or not caring at all, cheerfully babbles about all the world and his wife. "You know, I have heard stories about your Circle of the Magi, my dear Wynne," the Antivan elf slurs in his heavy accent, licking his fingers clean in slowly. It somehow looks extremely dirty. Okay, everything Zevran does looks somewhat dirty. He can even brush his teeth in a dirty way. I swear he does that on purpose just to tease me when he catches me staring. And it's not what you think! You would stare, too, if someone practically swallowed their toothbrush!

"Is that so", Wynne replies icily. She's been trying to talk to the elf in earnest but all she got in return was him commenting on her bosom.

"There is a Circle in my country, of course, but perhaps things are different here," Zevran continues, completely unperturbed by Wynne's hostility. He sucks at his cooked carrots, having the assembled templars staring at him in horrified fascination. "I visited the Antivan Circle on official Crow business, once. Met a beautiful young apprentice who was very eager for a taste of the outside world..."

"Please! Please, get to the point," Wynne interrupts hastily.

As a reply the elf rakes his eyes over Wynne's body in a way that makes her clutch her fork as if she was about to poke his eyes out with it. "All I wonder is whether the templars guard the mages here as closely as they do in Antiva," the elf explains. "In Antiva, the templars watch the Circle like a jealous
husband guarding the chastity of a wanton bride."

"Interesting metaphor, but yes, it is not too different in Ferelden," Wynne replies, pretending not to notice how Knight-Commander Greagoir almost chokes on his steak.

"And is it also true that when the moon swells to fullness, the mages of the Circle gather at the top floor of their tower and, naked under the stars, make love to each other?" Zevran inquires, his voice clearly audible all across the dining hall. All mages have fallen silent. Where usually the templars have to shush them, now not a single whisper is to be heard.

"What?" Wynne shrieks. "No! Maker's breath..."

"Oh. I found out recently that it was not true in Antiva and hoped that it would be in Ferelden. Alas." Utterly disappointed Zevran turns to take a look at the assembled mages. A few seconds later he grins like a cat that got the cream. "Well, well, it has not yet happened, but that can easily be remedied."

"The stories we hear down here about the Crows... they're not true, are they?" I ask against my better judgement. Usually asking Zevran anything about his past, his former employers, even about the weather leads to moments of utter embarrassment. "They all sound a little far-fetched." But at least talking to Zevran will take anybody's mind of discussing tranquility.

"I cannot say. What have you heard? In Antiva, we hear that Fereldan men cannot sleep without a dog in their bed. Is that true?"

"A dog? No, of course not." Well, in Rori's and my case it's more like the dog cannot sleep without us. Means, we far too often have a dog in our bed though he is not welcomed. And when we don't let him in, he chews on my boots. I swear, he's jealous that I get far more attention than he does. "We value our dogs, it's part of our history."

"Oh. Perhaps it was simply a reference to your Fereldan women, then?"

"Well, now that you mention it..." I laugh. "Some of them can be rather bitchy... Ouch!" I rub my shin where Rori kicked me.

"Are you refering to a special young lady?" Zevran chuckles. I do but the way she glares at me, I think it is rather unwise, maybe even life-endangering to answer that question. "But those stories you heard? All true."

"Really. Even the ones that talk about how you all... you know... get paid to..." I begin to stammer and blush, causing Zevran to grin this knowing, patronizing grin.

"Especially those ones."


"Oh, I don't think you are one to complain. Your multiple exertions with your beautiful fellow Grey Warden should leave any man exhausted and completely satisfied."

Err... haha... Now, that was a piece of information I'd rather have kept from being spit out in front of a whole group of templars.

And there it is again! That moment when I once more regret having even considered talking to Zevran. Much more I regret having skipped past the consideration. I guess, hiding under the table
until the blushing stops is beyond question? Where are the abominations when one needs them? Or a rampant mage running wild? Starting another argument about the Rite of Tranquility would also do...

But no! Of course this is just a moment when absolutely nobody says absolutely nothing and I feel their eyes all bore into me – and Rori. Her face bright red, her eyes squeezed shut and her shoulders slumped, she clearly wishes she was invisible.

When dinner is over Rori hurries away without waiting for me. Wondering if she is mad at me for that stupid remark I made about being in the wrong order, I start looking for her. She is not in her room, so I check with Leliana, Morrigan and Wynne but she is not there either. Cullen hasn't seen her and I hurry to convince him there's no need to report her missing. On my way back to my room I check in hers once more but she still isn't there.

Now really worried, I wonder if I should return to Cullen and have the templars search for her. I decide to give her another ten minutes before checking her room again. In case she hasn't shown up then, I really will alarm the templars.

The whole templar business becomes completely unnecessary the moment I enter my room. Because that's just where Rori is - wearing nothing but a pair of silk lace panties. She's usually the practical type of girl when it comes to clothing, but she really has a thing for Orlesian lingerie. I so do not object.

She kneels on my cot, her hands resting on her slightly parted thighs and defiantly stares at me with her beautiful dark blue eyes. “Now, this is what you are totally not going to touch tonight,” she pouts as soon as she spots me.

Oops. She is mad at me for that stupid remark.

Lifting her arms to have her hands meet behind her head, she pushes her busty bosom forward. Then, never taking her eyes of me, she slowly runs her hands down the sides of her neck, teasingly cups her breasts before she lets her hands slide down her belly and across the inside of her thighs, where she has them rest on her knees.

Merciful Andraste!

With my back pressed against the door, I gawk with my mouth having dropped open, expecting my eyes to pop out of their sockets any moment. The mere sight of her makes my manhood stir and throb. I have a major hard-on before even half of her sinful performance is over.

Hesitating, Rori watches me as if expecting me to say something.

Sorry, kitten, I'm beyond the capability of speaking. You just dumbfounded me rather effectively.

Her daringness is faltering as she blushes and she reaches for a blanket to cover herself. An animalistic snarl stops her and she returns to her kneeling position, a puzzled look on her face. I can see my own reflection in the small mirror at the wall above the cot. My pupils are dilated with only a narrow amber ring surrounding the black depths. That expression... I hardly recognize myself. If I didn't know I am that man with that... feral... expression... Whoa! I look almost scary... and manly... and for sure outrageously handsome – although I really ought to get a haircut soon...

Rori blinks at me. She looks so young and innocent that moment despite her far from innocent display. Then she smirks and the moment is gone. Casting an upwards glance at me, she bites her lips, then trails her hands across her thighs and belly. Tugging at the waistband of her panties teasingly with her right hand, she lifts her left to her mouth, pressing her fingers to her lips. Without taking her eyes of me, she sucks her index finger into her mouth ever so slowly. At the same time her
hand slips past the waistband, cupping hermons.

She blushes a deep crimson, her hands tremble lightly. That doesn't stop her, though, to push her hand further down. Her fingers come away slick when she moves them back to her mouth to thoroughly lick them clean before returning to her sinful ministration.

In the dim light of the candles and with the black silk hiding her movements, I am left to guessing what she is actually doing. Not that I have much trouble with my imagination. The way she looks at me from half-hooded eyes, these cute mewing noises she makes... She darts out the rosy tip of her tongue to lick her lips... With her free hand she caresses her breasts, pinches her nipples and rolls the hardening pearls between her fingers... oh Maker!

That drooling, gaping and gasping fool at the door, that's me. My knees feel somewhat wobbly, and I'm far too hot, it's like a fever. My head is airy, dizzy. Alright, Alistair, breathe! That's not that hard to do, is it? Okay, it is hard... and talking about hard... Boy, am I hard! It's almost painful. Perhaps it's about time to do something about that?

Alright, kitten, so, we're playing games? Well, I'm in. Why should I be the only one reduced to watching?

I know she regards me carefully to see how I react. Sure of my audience I slip out of my shirt in a totally sexy way – okay, I think it is sexy. At least I manage to pull it over my head without getting entangled with my sleeves or my head getting stuck midway because I forgot to unbutton it. I am in a fantastic shape, all chiseled and not an ounce of fat anywhere. All muscles as hard as steel. And no, I am not exaggerating!

I lean against the door as nonchalantly and casually as I can possibly manage when I open my breeches and reach into my leather pants. Maker's Breath, I cannot believe I am doing this! I cannot believe this is happening. It's like one of Zevran's stories having come true. It's kinda awkward, but also thrilling and so hot. When I free my erection from my pants, Rori sits up and stares, watching me run my hand up and down my shaft. She moans softly, licking her lips and it takes all the self control I can find inside of me to not cross the distance between us – and it's a very small room so it would only be two steps – and shove my length down her throat. But she said I wouldn't get to touch her tonight and I won't without her permission.

So we stick to this sweet torture, watching without touching – well, at least not each other. She touches herself a lot in all these beautiful exciting places. She is so ravishing in her embarrassment and arousal. She's scared of her own boldness and swept away by the sensation of the pleasure she gives herself. Maker, she's the most beautiful creature He has ever created in His glory.

Err...

That doesn't sound blasphemous, does it?

Not that I care at that very moment. I am too busy with my own climax. Even while cuming I find myself at awe at how far I can shoot my load. Boy, what a mess! I wonder... I wonder if I could shoot it any farther...
Cullen's Predicament

Standing with my back against the door, I still clutch my manhood, staring stupidly at my equally flustered and shocked girl. Boy, I just beat my meat right in front of her! She watched me, just like I watched her. It was so... so... the way she played with her breasts... wow... WOW!

Rori licks her quivering lips. Her eyes dark with desire, her breathing ragged, she is overwhelmed by embarrassment. She cannot even look at me, her words are hardly audible, no more but a husky whisper. „Fuck me!“

„What?!“

A shudder runs through her as she forces herself to look at me. Her pupils are dilated, her lips moist and her cheeks flushed. Maker's Breath, she's beautiful. „Fuck me!“ she breathes, her voice a feral purr.

Oh merciful Andraste!

Whoa! This is... dirty!

Dirrrty!

Wynne so would wash her mouth with soap. Rori would spit foam bubbles for three days in a row.

Andraste's flaming sword! The mere sound of her voice makes my manhood twitch. That low animalistic growl rumbling in my chest, I so cannot believe that's me. My body moves on its own accord. It's certainly not me ordering it to stalk her like a predator. I'm usually all awkwardness but certainly not that smooth, dangerous grace. The man in the mirror has absolutely no resemblance with me although he wears my face. He's so damn sexy... I am so damn sexy... and then I wiggle my eyebrows at my own reflection and hello! There's good old Alistair again...

Next thing I stumble over one of Rori's boots - Blasted curses of a thousand misfortunes! Why does she always have to leave those lying around where one just has to trip over them! - and tumble onto the bed, accidentally knocking my head against Rori's nose, causing bright red blood to spurt from it.

„Oh blast! I'm so sorry, kitten!“

A sharp knock at the door makes us both jump. Even more so when said door is thrust open right afterwards and in storms Cullen in full plate armour, all agitated and torn and so utterly tormented he's close to tears.

„Alistair...“ he gasps. „Your... your Highness... I... I need your help... now... oh Maker!... please don't let it be too late!... We have to hurry!“ That's when he finally realizes what his eyes make him see, namely Rori naked but for her panties with her nose bleeding heavily and I naked but for my pants and both of us in bed together. „What in the name of the Maker are you doing?“

Shock has us frozen to the spot, so Rori's reaction is time-delayed. You can totally see it dawn on her slowly as she gawks at Cullen, that realization that he is here when he shouldn't be and she is there totally not wearing anything to decently cover her. With a startled squeak, she pulls the blanket all over her head.

„What in the name of the Maker are you doing here?“ she wails from beneath the blanket.
I don't have time for being mortified. I just desperately, hurriedly try to stuff everything back into my pants that is currently poking out of them rather stiffly.

„Did you hit her?“ Whatever had Cullen so upset that he came running to me in the middle of the night, he's knight and gentleman enough to forget about it instantly when there is a damsel in distress.

„No!“ Rori answers that question for me, her voice muffled by the blanket, when all I manage is a completely incomprehendible stammered attempt of an explanation. „He's just a lummox!“

„I... I shouldn't have come here,“ Cullen mumbles, reduced once more to the mess of a man he was when storming through the door. „I shouldn’t... there's nothing you can do anyway... nothing you should do... it's wrong... I have to accept... Oh Maker, give me the strength to do what is right...“ He sways, almost stumbles over the very same boot that sent me falling before, as he turns on his heels and storms out of the room as abruptly as he entered.

„Do you think we should go after him?“ Rori asks, peeking out from under the blanket.

I'm already on my way – after a last check that everything that has to be inside of my pants is exactly there and nowhere else.

„Cullen!“ I call after him as I rush around the corner and almost collide with the templar. He has chosen the very middle of the corridor to fall to his knees, his hands folded tightly for a feverish prayer, his voice cracked. He is so trying to not break into tears.

I've already seen him as tormented before when his mind was intruded and twisted by blood mages. He's a complete wreck and I am completely lost as what to do or say.

Boy, am I glad when Rori shows up, wearing the grey pullover Wynne knitted for me. For her it's like a short dress and again my clothes look better on her than they do on me. She presses my shirt to her bleeding nose, shrugging apologetically when I frown at her.

„Cullen?“ she says softly, reaching out to touch his shoulder. She makes him jump. He backs away, burying his face in his hands.

"Don't make this any harder, I beg you," the templar mumbles with his shoulders slumped. With every word he retreats one more step until he just turns and runs away, forcing us to chase after him.

It's not as if he is trying to shake us off but he knows his way around and we don't. Plus Rori's bleeding nose slows us down. In the end we lose him and are stranded somewhere in the tower in the middle of the night.

“Blast! Where did he go?”

We wander around the tower for some time but no sign of Cullen.

“Did you hear that?” Rori suddenly stops, tilting her head to one side to listen closely. She even holds her breath and I follow her example. There's a distant sound, almost too faint to hear.

“There's someone crying.” I turn into the direction of the noise. It leads us back to Cullen and Carroll with a female mage with long dark hair and a haunted look in her brown eyes between them. She's crying so hard, she can't even walk properly, getting dragged along by the templars.

Rori beckons me to stay hidden and we crouch behind one of the many statues to watch the templars and the mage.
“Shut up, bitch,” Carroll snaps, yanking hard enough at her arm to make her stumble. With her hands bound behind her back she’d have fallen if not for Cullen to catch her.

“Carroll!” he hisses, causing the other templar to sulk. “Don't be cruel.”

“What? She'll be tranquil in a while. Nothing will matter to her anymore then.” Carroll sneers. “Serves her right for helping that bastard Jowan escape.”

“She never used blood magic herself,” Cullen murmurs.

“We do not know. Just because we haven’t seen her using it, doesn’t mean she doesn't know how to do it. She’s been close to Jowan. Anything is possible,”

They move on, practically carrying the mage hanging between them. Her legs aren't supporting her anymore. She's trembling so heavily, her whole body is visibly shaking.

“Damn,” Carroll suddenly exclaims, fumbling around at his belt to find something missing. “I left the keys back in the dungeon. I'll be right back!”

Before Cullen can stop him, Carroll runs off to fetch the keys, leaving his fellow templar alone with the desperate woman. Still holding on to her arm, he suddenly looks awfully lost in a situation that he should be used to, that he should be able to master. He's not a mere recruit anymore. He must have witnessed his share of Rites by now.

"Cullen," the woman breathes once Carroll is gone and the templar visibly crumbles at the sound of her voice. His eyes squeezed shut, the trembling lips a thin line, Cullen struggles to regain composure. He half turns to the woman, repeating his name like a chant, then, as if yanked back, turns away and tightens his grip on her as he drags her with him. The woman's sobs are made of pure anguish.

Rori and I are caught in the middle of something impossible, something unthinkable transpiring around us. We still stand and stare slack-jawed when the templar and the woman have passed by.

“Where does he take her?” Rori asks as we once more hurry after Cullen.

“The Harrowing Chamber.” And that is at the very top of the tower. Means we run up all the stairs we ran down before. I was hoping for some exertions tonight but running up and down staircases is nothing I had on my mind.

“They are going to make her tranquil! How can he let that happen?”

“He's a templar. It's part of his job,” I point out.

“But he loves her!” Rori cries out.

I stop and grab her by her shoulders, forcing her to face me. “Don't say this out loud, Rori. You'll get him into more trouble than you can even imagine, if anybody as much as suspects he could be biased in his actions because of his feelings for her.”

“But...”

“Not a single word to nobody!”

When we pant up the last staircase, we find Cullen in the very spot where we first met him when he was held captive by Uldred and his lot. He's completely still like a statue, his head hung low, he is
the incarnation of hopelessness.

“Cullen, where's the woman?” Rori pants, leaning against a shelf for support. Her nose has started bleeding again.

“It's too late,” Cullen murmurs soundlessly after Rori has repeated her question twice.

"Cullen,” Rori says intently, coming to stand so close to him that he has to face her. He does so reluctantly, probably knowing her too well by now as to expect her to let him walk away just like that. "There's a way to save her... well, kind of saving her... although it's unpleasant... more than that... but, at least it would give her a chance to survive and stay herself."

At least her agitation kicks him out of his stupor. "You're talking about recruiting her for the Grey Wardens." Cullen rubs the back of his neck and begins to pace the corridor like a trapped animal. "I would lie if I said I hadn't thought about this," he confesses and it sounds as if he almost chokes on the words. "I was even tempted to ask you to recruit her... I came to you to beg you to recruit her..." He snorts out a bitter laughter. "Maker, listen to me! I shouldn't even consider this! I shouldn't have let this happen at all! I should have controlled myself."

"Cullen, lets not talk about the things you should have done but about the things you can do."

“There is nothing I can do! Nothing you can do!” he snaps. Punching his fist repeatedly against the wall, his eyes squeezed shut, Cullen groans: "I wasn't strong enough. I prayed to the Maker to help me resist but I lost." Three deep breaths later, he manages to straighten again. It's incredible how he over and over can regain control over himself when only just before he was a complete mess.

The difference between Cullen and Rori clearly is that he has learnt that he has to accept the things he cannot change, while she always will try to change the things she cannot accept.

So instead of wasting more time with the templar, Rori just runs up the last flight of stairs that lead to the Harrowing Chamber and before either Cullen or I, following on her heels, can stop her, bursts through the door.

Knight-Commander Greagoir, First Enchanter Irving and the other assembled templars turn to her, staring as if she was a demon materializing out of nowhere. The female mage is fixed to a chair with iron bonds around her wrists and ankles, her waist, chest, neck and forehead. There's absolutely no way she can move as much as an inch. The instruments used for the Rite of Tranquility lie on a metallic table next to the creepy chair.

“Stop!” Rori cries, crossing the distance between her and the witnesses of the Rite. “I use the Right of Conscription on... that woman... mage... whatever her name is.”

Knight-Commander Greagoir that very moment looks as if he gladly made Rori tranquil just to get rid of that nuisance. “What? You don't even know who she is!”

Knight-Commander Greagoir that very moment looks as if he gladly made Rori tranquil just to get rid of that nuisance. “What? You don't even know who she is!”

“That doesn't matter, does it?” Rori says, sounding surprisingly calm.

"With due respect to you and your cause, but I do not believe you quite know what you are doing,” Greagoir rumbles, trying hard to ignore the fact that Rori is wearing nothing more than a far too big pullover smeared with blood and boots while I appear totally shirtless.

“I do what I feel is right,” Rori says softly.

The Knight-Commander has clearly been prepared for a fight, regarding her as an obstreperous teenager that needs to be taught a lesson. The gentleness of her tone catches him by surprise and
melts his resistance away.

Rori may be small, she may be young and inexperienced, she may not be properly dressed – still, there's something about her, the way she holds herself, the quality of her voice, her honesty, her bravery – it makes her outstanding.

She endures Greagoir's scrutiny without faltering, never avoiding his gaze, also never challenging him. She doesn't plead as she is no beggar. She doesn't command as she is not his superior. Greagoir knows he just can deny her request and there's nothing she could do about it. But the way she addresses him, makes him consider.

“Very well,” Greagoir finally sighs. “I take it you want her to be stored under the same conditions as Jowan?” He beckons the templars to free the mage from the chair and lead her back to her cell. The woman is so confused, she's beyond realizing what is happening around her.

“I think we all should go to bed now,” Irving says tiredly once the mage is gone. “I am clearly too old for that much excitement,” he mutters as he scuffles out of the Harrowing Chamber. “And oh these blasted stairs!”

In the end it's only Rori, Cullen and I left behind. The templar shifts his weight uncomfortably, rubbing his neck nervously. “I... I guess, I should thank you,” he mumbles, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“I'm not entirely sure I did her or you a favour,” Rori sighs,

“You did,” Cullen assures her as he leads us both out of the Harrowing Chamber.

“Cullen?” Rori says after some time of silence as we descend to our sleeping quarters.

“Hm?”

“Who did I actually recruit?”

That question makes him laugh. I cannot remember I've ever heard him laugh before. “Her name is Solona Amell.”
"Did you hit her?" Art by Erusel.
„Cullen? Have you seen Rori anywhere?“ I've been searching for her for a while. She's neither in her room nor in mine. She's not with Wynne and Morrigan or Leliana, keeping Zevran company. The elf is in detention for causing quite some chaos in the apprentice's quarters – including him and several apprentices, excluding any clothes... and, oh well, it's Zevran... you get the impression.

Knight-Commander Greagoir certainly would have loved to put Rori and me in detention, too. After a few questions that made Rori, Cullen and me squirm, he decided that he does not wish to know the exact circumstances that led both Rori and me to the Harrowing Chamber in the middle of the night and only half dressed.

„When have you last seen her?“ Cullen asks, rather alarmed.

„When talking to Solona.“ The poor mage is an awful mess. She has recovered from the shock but that's about all she has recovered from. She's tough, though. She'll cope with what has happened to her ever since she got imprisoned.

Cullen immediately agrees on helping me searching for my missing fellow Warden. We do not find her. But we find Carroll, standing guard at the pier. „That impertinent ginger with the big tits?“ he yawns when asked about Rori. I cannot get rid of the impression Carroll's quite weird, somewhat as if he's been damaged somehow. „She left an hour ago. Said I should give you this. Told her I wasn't her errand boy. But since you are here now...“ He hands me a small wooden box.

„She left? But where did she go?“ I exclaim. Rori didn't say a word about leaving. What in the name of the Maker is she up to now?

„How should I know?“ Carroll sulks, rubbing his chin. „She punched me. I said I wanted a reward for delivering that box, just some fun... and she punched me. Got really upset, that's what she did. And all because I wanted to have a bit of fun. I really should have thrown that box into the lake."

Cullen groans. „Carroll, did you grope her?“

„It's boring to stand here all day long,“ Carroll complains.

„You did... what?!” Carroll retreats hastily to stand behind his fellow templar when I snarl at him.

„Lyrium,“ Cullen mutters. „Leave him alone."

For now I do. I know what lyrium can do to a man's mind. I have seen it with my very own eyes, fellow templars losing their minds, their brains destroyed by years of lyrium abuse. Some manage to control their addiction – as much as you can control such a thing. The Chantry only allows a templar a certain amount of lyrium. Enough to keep you functioning. You never feel it's quite enough. And that's where the smugglers come in. They sell what the weak-minded templars long for.

Well, Carroll is not my problem. Rori is. Sighing, I open the box and stupidly stare at the large bronze key inside.

Huh?

„Looks like the ones they use at the Spoiled Princess,“ Cullen observes when I take the key from the box and turn it round and round, hoping I will get whatever Rori is trying to tell me.
Half an hour later the key from the box opens the door to the Princess Suite. The room is filled with shadows and light. A fire crackles in the fireplace, candles are carefully placed all over the place. Just Rori is not to be seen. Instead on a small table right in front of me there's a cake with several lit candles. I move closer and find the cake is a wheel of cheese spiked with exactly twenty candles.

My kitten just knows what I like. And only she would decorate cheese with candles. I chuckle, picking up the small card leaning against the plate.

*Happy Birthday, Alistair!* the card reads in Rori's neat handwriting.

Aww, she remembered! How cute! I only mentioned the date once months ago after she confessed the day of her Joining had also been her birthday.

I open the card and read: *Blow out the candles and make a wish.* And beneath a tiny *p.t.o.* Smiling I do as I am told. I really don't know what to wish for, though. I am perfectly happy that very moment. Sure, there's all these big wishes... end the Blight, survive, live happily ever after with Rori... You know, that type of wishes that seem too big to even dream about.

I turn the card and find *MEOW!* scribbled across.

Huh?

I turn the card round and round in my hands, looking for something I must have missed when I suddenly catch glimpse of a movement in the mirror across the room. I look up and stare at the reflection.

Maker's Breath!

Rori is standing there behind me. She's dressed in black knee high leather boots and a corset rimmed with black fur and with the most impressive push-up effect. Her small clothes are just that: Small. Tiny in fact. Actually it looks like a triangle of silk and two strings and that's about it.

Her face is half covered by a cat mask rimmed in the same black fur and with silver whiskers. The mask cannot hide the blush on her cheeks or how she bites her lips bashfully. She kneads her fingers, shifting her weight uncomfortably as she looks for a reaction from me, our eyes meeting across the mirror.

Oh, she's adorable!

„Please don't laugh,“ she begs when I only stand there and gape at her open mouthed.

I am far from laughing. I am fantasizing about making her bend over that table and fuck her from behind... Whoa!... Whoa!... Did I just think that? Oh Maker! I so want to make her mew.

She says *MEOW!*

I say *RAWR!*

Rori squirms, pulling at the corset and tugging at her small cloth – or whatever you want to call that tiny bit of almost nothing – as if she in any way could make those pieces provide more cover.

„Leliana persuaded me to get... this... a while ago when we were in Denerim. She said... you know... because you keep calling me kitten... oh, I just look ridiculous!... This was a stupid idea... sorry.“
“Don’t!” I whisper when she's about to take her mask off. Actually I think Orlesian fashion to be extremely ridiculous. Especially the masks. But I am changing my mind at that very moment because Rori in her kitten attire is... she is... wow. Yep, she's just WOW! In capital letters and with an exclamation mark. „You’re so cute.“

„This is not meant to make me look... cute!” she pouts. She sighs in exasperation and stomps her foot in frustration about her own seduction failure – her opinion, not mine. I mean, she's hot – in a very Rori-like way. Rori is no femme fatale. She's just too cute. But her bashful cuteness mixed with that boisterous boldness that gets her into situations like this – that's her charm.

Our eyes meet across the mirror, hers starlight blue like the night sky, mine golden in the soft glow of the candles. She's completely mortified, her bottom lip trembling as she tries to bite back her tears, her bosom heaves at the effort of her suppressed sobs. And then she bolts. I swirl around, blocking her path before she can disappear behind the screen.

„Alistair... please!” she whimpers when my arms lock around her and I pin her against the wall with my body. She tries to wiggle herself out of my grip, avoiding to look at me.

„Stop that,“ I growl, entangling my fingers with her hair and yanking hard enough to make her gasp, forcing her to tilt her head back and expose her throat to me. I nuzzle the side of her neck, her pulse throbbing against my lips. I trail little bites up her throat, then capture her lips for a fierce kiss, tasting her.

„I take it this...“ I run my hands up and down the sides of her body, the delicate texture of the corset smooth against my palms. „... is my birthday present.“

„More what's inside;“ Rori mumbles compunctiously as she bangs her head against the flat, solid broadness of my chest repeatedly, knowing she has to accept her deafeat as I won't let her get away.

„Well, then I guess, I should unwrap it, don't you think?“ I slide my hands down her back to cup her buttocks and squeeze.

„Oh yes, yes, please, take off all that silly wrapping! I can help you... We can start with that mask...“

„Not so fast! I've never been one to just tear my gifts open.“

„Such a blunt lie!“ Rori snorts.

I offer a shrug and a lopsided and rather sheepish grin as an apology. „Well, nothing ever has been wrapped so nicely.“

„Now you're making fun of me!“

„You are underestimating your female powers, little temptress. You are ravishing in your beauty,“ I purr into her ear, my breath hot against her skin. „Can't you see what you are doing to me?“ To show her, I grind my hips against her, pressing my erection against her belly. That shuts her up. It also stops her squirming. „Now, stop hissing at me, kitten. I rather hear you purr.“

„I'll feel much more comfortable without all this...“

„No.“

„But...“

„No. This is my present. I like it just as it is. Now shut up.“ I lean in to kiss her again, expecting this
argument to be over.

„But...“

Oh for Andraste's sake!

„You are a very bad kitten tonight,“ I inform her, hurling her around to push her down over that table, with her ass high in the air and her head pressed down as I hold an iron grip on her neck. She can only as much as gasp baffled before my palm comes down on her buttocks for three swift sharp blows. She winces and mews at the same time. Shivering in anticipation for the next three blows to hit her.

Oh Maker! That small clothes she wears – from behind it's only a string between her buttocks. And that tiny bit of cloth between her legs, is getting soaked with her juices as I spank her.

One hand on the small of her back, the others testing her wetness, I watch her across the mirror. The way her bosom strains the corset, how the dark pools of her eyes glitter with desire behind that mask. She's watching me, too. How I slip out of my shirt, how I slowly undo the breeches of my pants, freeing my erection. I run my hand along the hard shaft a few times, making her wait when she's already squirming. Hey, this is my birthday, right? So I get to play the games I want to play.

„Tell me what you want me to do with you,“ I order, my voice sounding hoarse and feral and so not like Alistair. I keep stroking my length just to show her what she's missing.

„I...„ Rori breathes, eyes wide, bosom heaving. „I want you.“

„You want me? What exactly do you want of me?“ Whoa... this is fun. And hot. I just wish she would hurry and just spit it out.

„I want you inside of me,“ she wails, clutching the edge of the table for support as she wiggles her cute little ass at me.

„I don't think you're being precise enough.“

Rori groans in exasperation. For a moment it seems as if she's about to talk back but one quick slap reminds her to be obedient. „Fuck me!“ she hisses. „Fuck me with your huge hard cock!“ As soon as the words have left her mouth, she claps both her hands over it, staring at me wide eyed and with her cheeks burning bright red.

Oh. Ah. Okay. That was detailed. Nothing much left to guessing here.

„You didn't just say that!“ I gasp, looking as shocked as she does.

„You ordered me to say it!“ Rori squeaks. „Now would you please be so kind and do what the lady asked of you?“

„That wasn't exactly ladylike, you know...“ I tease. I so know I am driving her crazy. But she's just adorable when she gets upset with me.

„Alistair, shut up and fuck me! Now!“

„You've clearly spent too much time around Zevran...“

„Alistair!“

She struggles to get up, clearly having lost her patience with me. But I am not willing to give up
I never thought my templar training could come in handy that way. As a templar you learn how to shackle mages with almost anything you might have at hand. It's really essential knowledge when dealing with apostates — and really useful knowledge when dealing with your disobedient woman.

The look on her face: Priceless!

The look on my face: Smug.

„Alistair! You didn't dare!“ she gasps, pulling at the bonds rather unsuccessfully.

„I also know how to gag someone,“ I point out pleasantly. Templar training. Now I finally know what all those years in the Chantry were good for!

Rori opens her mouth for a retort, closes it again, though, when I arch an eyebrow at her, challenging her to dare and talk back. She scowls at me behind her kitten mask, a put adorning her lips. It's incredibly cute.

„Trust me,“ I add in a soothing whisper when her expression changes from astonishment to wary and she begins to pull at the bonds, struggling to get free. „I'd never hurt you.“

Rori visibly relaxes and nods her consent.

Now, this could become the best birthday I ever had...

I kick off my boots and slip out of my pants slowly, really making a show of it. She wets her lips several times, watching me hungrily — then bursts into laughter when I pirouette and smack my own ass.

Yeah, I know. I just couldn't help it! It was too tempting.

„You're so silly!“ Rori giggles.


I crawl onto the bed, never taking my eyes of her. She bites her lips to stifle her laughter but fails miserably. Really! How is a man supposed to perform manly and sexy when his woman has a gigglefit?

I hook my fingers in the strings of that small small small cloth of hers and just rip that whiff of silk apart.

„Hey! Do you actually realize what that cost!?“ Rori complains. I am tempted to gag her with the remains of her own underwear — if I dared. Maker! I have her shackled to the bed already. I mean, I cannot believe I did this. She's completely at my mercy. She knows. I know. And it so turns both of us on. Instead of gagging her, I return to reminding her of her place by delivering three sharp blows to her sweet little ass. She goes on like that she won't be able to sit for the next few days.

Between each slap I take my time to thrust my fingers into her tight entrance, rubbing my thumb across that small hard knot between her folds. I keep circling my thumb lazily and pushing my fingers into her in a tantalizingly slow rhythm once the obvious punishment is over. „Anything else you got to complain about?“ I ask in a dangerously low voice. Rori hurries to shake her head no, squirming at my touch. „I can't hear you.“ I pull away from her, causing her to whimper, her eyes
widening when I lick my fingers clean.

„No,“ she breathes, pulling once more at the bonds that hold her arms in place above her head. No chance, kitten. I actually paid attention during that part of my templar training.

„No what?“

„No, my prince.“

„Such a good girl. I think you deserve a reward.“

„Indeed I do,“ Rori agrees. For someone shackled to a bed she has a very big mouth.

„Let me clarify the rules,“ I growl lowly. „And I am only going to do this once. You break the rules, you face the consequences. Rule No. 1: You do not speak without permission.“

„That's a stupid rule,“ Rori complains. I glower at her, she glowers back at me. I lose.

I mean, I've been holding back for a while, trying to ignore the throbbing in my manhood. And there she is, her folds slick and wet and she so eager to feel me inside of her. I'm really not going to waste time on arguing with her. „Oh, alright, forget about it!“ I sigh.

„You clearly need more practice in being dominant,“ Rori giggles.

„You clearly need more practice in being submissive,“ I retort and before she can spit out another smart reply, I silence her with a kiss, ravishing her mouth, our tongues twined in a battle for dominance. She strains against her bonds, arching her back delicately. „You're going to hurt yourself, kitten,“ I murnour as I press open mouthed kisses to her heated skin. My fingers fumble rather helplessly at the ties of her corset. As pretty as it is, I want full access to her breasts.

I will never understand why lady's lingerie is designed in a fashion that makes it impossible for a man to undress her without help. I grow impatient, Rori starts giggling and the damn corset is still as tightly tied as before. It's easier to unbble a suit of plate armour! Cursing under my breath I grab for Rori's dagger – formerly Duncan's – on the bedside table and make short work of the corset.

„Don't say a word!“ I snap at Rori. „I buy you a new one.“

„Don't bother,“ she grins.

I toss the blasted corset aside, finally getting to my birthday present. Oh, she's beautiful. The way her arms are tied to the bed above her head, forces her to arch her back, pushing her bosom upwards.

Stradling her I cup her breasts and squeeze them, pushing them together. Her skin is quite slippery as if she has rubbed it with some oil. That gives me an idea... I can't help it. I just want to know how it would feel... it's so tempting... so I rub my erection between her soft mounds.

„Err...“ Rori goes.

„Shush! It's my birthday.“ I rub her nipples between my thumbs, eliciting those cute mewing noises from her, while I keep sliding my length up and down the gap between her breasts. That feeling is... That sight is... WOW!

It probably would be awfully uncomfortable for her with her hands shackled and all... still... if she lifted her head a little and if I thrust a little farther upwards then...

„Uhm... you don't think you could suck...“
„No!“

„Birthday?“ I ask hopefully and give her my best version of puppy-dog-eyes.

„No!“ Rori laughs.

„Too bad,“ I sigh, tugging at her nipples reasingly. „I'll keep fantasizing then.“ Crawling backwards, I abandon that fantasy for now and attack her breasts with my mouth, sucking roughly at the hardened pearls, biting softly to make her moan. My hand travels farther down across the flat of her belly and past the soft curls between her legs, seeking to reach that little nub of pleasure.

She squirms and bucks, straining against the bonds that hold her in place. I don't know if it's worse for her or for me – her not being able to touch me. I miss her deft hands roaming my body, the whispering of her fingers across my skin. At the same time, that knowledge that I could do anything I wanted with her... mmmm, I guess, it's worth the suffering for now.

I pull her down until her arms are outstretched over her head, forcing her to arch her back even more. Her ass is delicately angling at the edge of the bed as I slip her legs over my shoulders and press my face against her heat. Her reaction comes instantly.

„No... Alistair... please...“ she whimpers, trying to shut her legs.

I have no intention of letting her go. Since she cannot get away, it's the perfect opportunity to feast on her and watch her get undone once her embarrassment is swept away by her pleasure. I smile against her heat, teasingly trailing my tongue across her slit. When I feel the hardness of that little pearl against the tip of my tongue, I begin my ministration. It's like worshipping a goddess – a rather unwilling and bitchy goddess that keeps snarling at me – never for long, though. She forgets about being mortified the moment I do this little trick with my tongue and then...

„Ohhh... yesss... Alistair!... Oh Maker!“

There. Didn't I tell you?

The sounds she makes, her excitement, it does strange things to me. I will never understand how every single one of those mewing noises she expresses, makes my length throb with anticipation. I can feel the pulsing of my blood in my veins, sense the heat that spreads through my loins and that sizzling that runs up and down my spine – and all that when she doesn't even touch me.

Rori is still panting, when I lift myself from my kneeling position between her legs to steal a kiss from her lips, mine still slick with her juices. I have no intention on waiting for her to recover. I just love the way her inner walls clench tightly around my length in the aftermath spasms of her orgasm.

„Maker!“ I groan. The sensation of her heat swallowing me washes through me like a tidal wave. She wanted this to be hard and fast. She wanted me to fuck her. And that's just what I do. I make her mew and purr and hiss, trapped in between pleasure and pain. She makes me roar, thrilled by how I control her body and the sight of her sinful beauty.

That mask covering her face, her cheeks blushed, her eyes closed, the moans that escape her parted lips, the way she wets them with the tip of her rosy tongue. The smooth, cool leather of her boots on my shoulders, the way her bosom bounces with every deep, strong thrust, the sight of my muscles rippling and of my length sliding in and out of her, my flesh glistening with her wetness.

Yep, definitely my best birthday ever.

Afterwards, holding her in my arms, I massage her wrists gently. The bonds left reddish marks on
her skin. Lifting her hands to my mouth I kiss the bruises.

„I'm sorry,“ I whisper with every kiss. She smiles in reply, that sweet soft smile of hers that is shining brilliantly with the warmth of her love.

„Don't.“ She bites her lower lip, then an impish grin spreads across her face. „But next time I get to tie you to the bed!“

„Oh? Intending to pay me back?“ I chuckle.

„Absolutely.“ Rori confirms. „Afraid?“

„As long as I don't have to wear a corset and a kitten mask, I guess I can handle it.“

„I really would love to see that!“ Rori laughs.

Should I dare? Should I? She'll say no anyway, won't she? So it cannot hurt...

„Well... for you... on condition that...“

„Yes?“

„On condition that you...“ I begin to stammer, stumbling over my own words. „...reconsider my former request... of you... uhm...“ Beats of sweat form on my forehead. Rori's undisguised amusement doesn't make things any better. She's going to tell me how cute I am when I'm bashful. I can tell by the way the corners of her mouth twitch as she tries to bite back her laughter. „...sucking me of while I rub my manhood at your breasts."

Now, that leaves her dumbfounded. She stares, blinks, her mouth opens and closes in stunned silence. She squirms a bit, kneads her fingers, considers. „Deal,“ she blurts out the very moment I want to tell her to forget it,

„What!?“

„You are in for some lingerie shopping once we return to Denerim,“ Rori says smugly. And she smirks. Oh, how she smirks!

„What!?“

„Getting cold feet now?“ she asks, teasingly cupping her breasts and running the tip of her tongue over her lips.

Oh blast! What did I get myself into?

Denerim is far, far away. My chances to die in the Deep Roads are certainly higher than to ever return there. My chances that Rori will forget about this if I make it back to Denerim alive... zero. Perhaps the archdemon has mercy and tears down the whole city including the lingerie shop.

Blast it!

„Maker,“ I gasp. „I do hope this is as mindnumbingly fantastic as I picture it.“
"I am so not going to this lingerie shop!" I laugh, wiping tears from the corners of my eyes. "Not after that performance!"

All I receive for an answer is: "Hehehe!" Rori rolls around on the bed, shaken by a fit of laughter. Her face is as red as a tomato and she gasps for air in between uncontrollable bursts of laughter.
What happened? Well, let me recapitulate...

I had this fantasy... you know, rubbing my manhood between her breasts while she sucks me off... a fantasy that then got ripped apart, stomped on and completely utterly destroyed by my silly woman.

She tried, oh she did. But every time I slid my erection between her breasts and the tip became visible to her, she howled with laughter. And then, after my third attempt - she promised she wouldn't laugh but of course she did - well, after that last try she looked up at me, tears of laughter stinging in her eyes and went: "I am so sorry! But it looks like an earthworm poking its head out of its hole."

POOF! there went my fantasy.

An earthworm... My manly feelings are hurt. Permanently damaged by the woman who claims she loves me.

"Breathe, you silly woman," I growl, trying hard to be mad at her. But how could I when she is so adorably coming undone with silly laughter? I love that clear ringing sound of her laugh, the way her eyes twinkle. She's so beautiful when flushed from head to toe. "You really know how destroy a man's dreams. I feel emasculated!"

"So-so-sorry," she gasps, biting into her pillow to stop herself from exploding into another violent gigglefit. "Hehehehe..."

"Okay, no more experimental kink today. Especially not for you, young lady."

It's time for snuggling together in bed, time for cheese and grapes and wine. Rori gets rid of her boots and the mask, clearly relieved she's once more herself. I hold her in my arms and enjoy her company. Sighing contently, I kiss the top of her head as she rests it against my chest. "You know, this is still the best birthday I ever had."

"It is a catastrophe!" Rori groans, pulling the blanket over her head. "I had it all planned out!" Her muffled voice sounds deject. "Leliana practiced with me. And then everything went wrong!"

"Aww, don't worry, kitten. You did great... until you compared my manhood to an earthworm. I have yet to recover from that blow. Wait... Leliana practiced with you?" Do I even want to know? I have right now a few rather sinful images popping up in my treacherous mind. They make the earthworm raise its head. "You don't talk to her about what we do... you know, all that..." Maker, they do not talk about this, do they?

"She showed me how to move. Like a choreography. Said it would drive you crazy." Rori scrambles out of bed to show me.

"Well, you did drive me crazy." I point out, sitting up at the edge of the bed to watch her repeat her performance.

"I should have done it like that..." She prances a few steps towards the bed with swaying hips, then gracefully sinks to her knees and crawls on all fours, every move fluent and seductive. As long as Rori doesn't think about what she's doing, she moves with a natural grace. "Then I would look at you like that..."

Oh Maker!

"I practiced that look in front of the mirror for... ten minutes... okay, five... the other five I pulled faces at my reflection... anyway, that look..." Biting her lips, she casts her eyes down and then,
fluttering her eyelashes gives me an upwards glance. She's down there on her knees and all naked, her bosom heaving beautifully when she stretches and rests her arms on my thighs. She'd make a desire demon pale with envy that moment. "And then..." she goes on, running her hands up the inside of my thighs, circling my length with her small hands. "Mhmm..." Yep, I am sporting an erection - again. That girl totally drives me crazy. She is more than I ever dreamt of. I just hope she's not going to burst into laughter again and call my proud, rock hard length a worm. I don't think I could endure this once more. I'd be bawling my eyes out for weeks.

The way she looks at me, makes me shudder in awe of the love and desire I see reflected in her beautiful eyes. I reach down to cup her face and she leans into the touch, nuzzling my palm. Rori licks her lips, her breath ghosting against the sensitive tip of my manhood. And then she makes up for all the awfully awkward moments, for the embarrassment and humiliation she pushed me through the last few hours, finally making this sinful fantasy come true...

Later I lie in bed with my beloved woman in my arms. I smile sleepily against her skin, wondering at how I got to be here at all. For such a long time I wished I had died with Duncan and the other Grey Wardens. Boy, I am such a complete idiot! I rather should have been thankful I was granted this second chance. I still don't understand why I was blessed when all the others had to die. I don't really think I deserve this. But I am deeply grateful that I am not dead - not yet. And I do hope that I will stay as unfathomable lucky. If fortune indeed favours fools I should have a real good chance to get through this alive.

So the prayer I send to the Maker this night, it's not for me, it's for Rori. I beg Him to keep her save, to watch over her. Oh Maker, without her, I am nothing. He sometimes has a rather strange sense of humour, so I do hope, He doesn't have the intention to take her away from me. I cannot help it, I imagine how He snorts and goes: Lad, that girl can totally look after herself!

The next morning at the break of dawn we meet our companions at the pier. The icy wind whips crisp snowflakes across the black water. Only the very top of the tower is visible in the grey sky, looming over us as we ride up the slope away from the lake. We have a few days on the road in front of us. Despite the cold, I don't mind. Nobody is really looking forward to entering the Deep Roads. Rori and I talked about leaving the dwarves alone with their kingmaking business. I mean, it's quite a risk to run around the Deep Roads in search for a Paragon that has gone missing a few years ago. Branka could be anywhere! All we know is she went to Ortan Thaig. And that's it. They thrust a map at Rori and me that we held upside down for five minutes, staring stupidly at it, before someone finally felt like turning it around. Not that it made any more sense to us then.

"Hopefully Dagna has found a dwarf to guide us or I don't see how we should get this done," Rori mutters as if she read my thoughts. She has pulled her hood over her head and wrapped a bright rainbow coloured scarf around the lower half of her face, only her eyes, squinted at the wind, being visible.

The reason why we're even considering running after Branka: the dwarves know more about the darkspawn than Rori and I together. Yeah, I know, no surprise there. We do need them.

"If Dagna hasn't, then you will," I laugh, pulling my own scarf tighter around my neck. It's green. I'm not particularly fond of green but with the weather being as mercilessly cold as it is, I don't really mind. Wynne insists it suits me - and you just don't argue about the colour of knitwear with a mage. Especially not with the mage who knitted it. Right now we're all glad Wynne is so obsessed with her knitting. Most of all Zevran and Schmooples. The elf constantly complains about the cold. He's the only one looking forward to returning to Orzammar. And Shale of course. It does not freeze, but there are no birds in Orzammar.
At night we set up camp inside an old barn. It at least provides a bit more shelter than camping in the open on the frozen ground where the wind tears at our tents. Leliana immediately drags Rori away. She's all bouncily giddy, hauling questions at her friend. "Sooo, you just have to tell me..." They sit down in the hay and I watch Leliana clapping her hands and hear her squeal. Rori's answers come hesitantly first. It's too dark to really see her face but the way she kneads her fingers and plays with her hair nervously, I know she is flustered.

It is never a bad idea to inspect your surroundings, get to know them, in case there's an attack or... um... anyway, I should take a look around that barn, as shabby and small as it is and make sure there are no nasty surprises anywhere. Especially that dark corner over there...

I pass by Leliana and Rori once...

"... you even have a glow about you, so shameless..." the bard giggles girlishly.

I pass by Leliana and Rori a second time... Once does not count.

"So... how is Alistair..." Leliana whispers, her voice fading when she spots me.

I'm fine, thank you. She could ask me if she so wanted to know, couldn't she? She wouldn't have to sit in dark corners whispering to my woman and acting as if she wasn't whispering when I walk by. Sometimes I just don't understand women.

I pass by Leliana and Rori a third time... just to make perfectly sure I didn't miss anything on my second round.

"... he must be quite delightful..." Leliana murmurs in a hushed voice.

I think... I think I just heard a very ominous sound right over there... and no, it's not the girls talking! I am so not eavesdropping. No, no, not at all. Now shush!

"Sometimes he has brilliant ideas of his own, too," Rori mutters, grinning impishly.

Sometimes? Hey! My ideas are always brilliant... at least I think so until someone comes and destroys this illusion and everything goes Poof! and I am back to realizing what a fool i am...

"... the little templar is all grown up and apparently... aehm... plays well with others..." Leliana purrs. And then both women start giggling.

What in the name of the Maker!?

"What are you giggling about?" I demand to know, giving up pretending I wasn't eavesdropping all the time. Rori looks up at me, squeaks, claps her hands over her mouth and rather unsuccessfully tries to suppress one of her infamous gigglefits. "Wh-what is she giggling about?" I ask Leliana. The bard just shrugs and snickers. I don't like that look on her face. It's so smug.

"Nothing!" Rori breathes. "Just... girl talk!"

Girl talk for sure... but I know who they were talking about... by mere incident... so I just have to know. Rori grins sheepishly at me when I snort at her answer. "Well...," she murmurs. "Girl talk about... you... and your... aehm... performance..."

"My performance? What performance? And why does it warrant giggling?" My manly feelings have to endure a lot of mistreatment today. First my beloved fellow Warden compares my proud manhood to an earthworm, now two women are giggling shamelessly about whatever performance I have
given... something about me playing with others and being delightful... and about my brilliant ideas when we all know they are seldomly brilliant.

Rori's sheepish grin grows even wider. I know that grin. It's the 'SORRY! I did something you really won't like'-grin. She gave me that grin when she decided to smuggle lyrium out of Orzammar - lyrium we still carry around with us by the way -, and that moment before she announced Avernus should live and go on with his researches (without the bloodmagic part), and when she invited Zevran into our party... well, you get the impression. It's a grin I really don't like to see on her.

"We're talking about how you treat her in bed," Leliana pleasantly explains as if she was talking to someone extremely stupid. "Nothing you should concern yourself with."

"How I treat... Oh Maker... What is wrong with you women?" Nothing I should concern myself with!? Andraste's flaming sword! This is... I can't believe they talk about that! That shameless bard! And... Rori... Maker! Why does she talk about such things? This is private! I do not run around and talk to anybody about what we do when we are alone... err... kinda alone... at least when nobody can see us...

How could she! And why does nobody ever ask me how she treats me in bed? Not that I would answer. Gentlemen don't talk about the performances of their women! Women obviously do.

By the love of Andraste... what did Rori tell Leliana? Did she mention the spanking? Did they talk about last night? About me tying her to the bed... About what I did with Rori's breasts... Maker! I do hope they didn't! What did Rori say about me having brilliant ideas of my own... Blast!

I'm feeling somewhat nauseous. I think, I have to sit down. Best somewhere in the dark where nobody can see me. And there I will die all alone of shame. My head will explode from the mere amount of blood that comes rushing to my face to make me blush.

Next to all the juicy details she could have given away... my performance... did she say it was... good? Did she say she likes it? Until now I assumed she does. But now... they giggled. Is giggling a good thing or bad? Was it a making-fun-of-stupid-goofy-Alistair-giggling or just a bashful giggling? I bet they called me cute...

I am not cute!

I am manly and strong and ruggedly handsome...

I have to ask Rori what she said... No, wait! I cannot possibly ask her if she thinks I am good in bed... that... no, I can't...

Rori is talking to Shale anyway. I do hope she's not discussing our love life with the golem as well! Okay, better the golem than Morrigan. Oh merciful Andraste! She doesn't do girl talk with Morrigan, does she? Certainly not... please?

When I begin to bite my fingernails nervously I realize I won't get no sleep until I find out. Leliana is sitting alone at the campfire, tending her bow. I circle around the fire five times before I just blurt out at her: "Soooo... what did you and Rori talk about?"

"What do you mean?" Leliana looks up from her weapon, grinning smugly.

Oh, that wicked bard! "You know what I mean... when you were giggling."

"We told you, didn't we?"
I so know that at the end of this conversation she will pinch my cheeks and I will feel like a complete idiot. I probably am for not just walking away. "The answer wasn't exactly precise... I mean, you talked about me... so I would want to know..." I stammer, already flustered and flushed and mortified to no ends. "What did Rori say about me?"

"Today or in general?"

"In general!?" I croak and slump down next to the bard. Suddenly I feel so dizzy. "Wh-what do you mean...? Oh... you're not! She can't! You talk about this... me... more often!?"

Oh... Blast it!

"Of course, Alistair," Leliana says pleasantly as if they were talking about shoes, pretty dresses, knitting, cooking... You know, all those innocuous female topics. "Rori and I are friends. Who else should she talk to about you and her feelings?"

"Uhm... nobody?"

"You really don't know women," Leliana laughs and - there you go! - pinches my cheeks. I so hate her! "Women talk about everything."

"But... certainly not about... well, you know... about... that!" I squeak, completely horrified.

"Especially about that."

"Maker!"

Leliana is like a demon that has found a victim to suck dry. She mercilessly assaults me while I am helplessly dumbfounded by shock. "So, let's see, you want to know what Rori said? Well, she once asked about your size..."

WHAT!?

"... she was worried you could be too big. If she described you correctly, you are rather well equipped but really nothing to worry about, quite the contrary..."

Someone please help me! I got stuck in the Fade, trapped in my worst nightmare...

"... she was afraid she could hurt you when giving you oral pleasure..."

Doom!

DOOM!

"... oh, by the way did you like her kitten costume? She looks so hot in it, don't you think? When she tried it on, I told her she just had to buy it!..."

Someone's making strange gurgling sounds. Oh, haha, that's me...

"Don't worry, Alistair, everything is fine. You make Rori happy and she loves you to death..."

HA! She certainly does! I am dying a thousand deaths at that very moment!

"Oh, look at you! Now you're all flushed... you're so cute!"
„Hello Sandal."

„Hello Rori, hello Alibear, hello puppy!“ The young dwarf beams at us, clapping his hands as he bounces around giddily. „Enchantment?“

„Not today, Sandal.“ Rori smiles warmly at Sandal and gives him a hug. The dwarf is specially fond of her and she usually has a treat for him, although he likes it best when he can craft an enchantment for her. I like the boy a lot. Yes, he has no more brain capacity than a toddler – even Morrigan admits Sandal is dumber than I am – but his cheerfulness just makes him adorable.

While Sandal plays with Barkley, Rori and I talk to Bodahn. He has hired a mercenary, a young elf from Denerim with short honey coloured hair and dark green eyes. „Darrian Tabris,“ he introduces him to us. „You Grey Wardens are the best protection a merchant can get but I cannot sit outside Orzammar and wait for your return while you are in the Deep Roads."

„You are Grey Wardens?“ Darrian asks in awe, staring at us as if we were an epiphany. „I've always dreamt of becoming a Grey Warden. But for an elf that's all what it is, a dream.“ He shrugs, offering a shy grin as he runs his nimble fingers through his short hair uneasily.

„Race or social status don't really matter to the Grey Wardens,“ I explain. „My mentor Duncan always said it's men and women from every race, warriors and mages, barbarians and kings. We are united by a higher cause, made brothers and sisters by our sacrifice.“

„That's... it sounds awesome,“ the elf laughs. „Where's the catch?“

„There's more than only one catch,“ Rori sighs. „When they say sacrifice, they mean it.“

„But their sacrifice it's for something great,“ the elf insists enthusiastically. „The greatest thing an elf like I can hope for is to empty the chamber pot of some nobleman.“ He looks at both of us expectantly. Five minutes later Rori has yet another new recruit. It took Duncan twenty years to rebuild the Grey Wardens of Ferelden and still he had only recruited a small number. Give Rori the same amount of time and she will have a group of a hundred or more. I just hope the choices she makes... I pray to the Maker they will all make it through their Joining. But I guess I should be more worried about my own survival for now.

The reason why we talk to Bodahn is Dagna. We cannot let her travel to the Circle all alone. She's never been to the surface before. And Bodahn is a nice fellow. He'll take care of her as if she was his own daughter.

Dagna already awaits us inside the gates of Orzammar. She pounces Rori as soon as she sees her. „What did they say? Did they say yes? Oh, please tell me they said yes!“

„Yes, they said yes,“ Rori laughs, swaying when Dagna, squealing with delight, locks herself around her waist to hug her tight. She even lifts Rori off the ground and whirls her around once. Then both
topple over.

„Hey, don't get her and yourself killed,“ I laugh, helping both girls back to their feet. Next Dagna clings to my leg and squeezes it in a bear hug.

„Thank you, oh, thank you! I'm your biggest fan forever! You make a dream come true! Oh! I'll go pack my bags right now! Wait... I already packed them two weeks ago! Haha... oh, I am so excited. “ She hops up and down so giddily, I just know we did the right thing. I do hope she'll find what she is looking for at the Circle.

„Get your stuff then,“ Rori laughs, hugging the giddy dwarf back. „You can travel with Bodahn, a dwarven merchant, and his son Sandal. “

„I cannot find the words to say how thankful I am. You are awesome! Both of you!“ Dagna cheeps, then she hugs both Rori and me goodbye. „Visit me at the Circle, will you? I so can't wait to get there! Thank you, thank you for always and forever!“

While Dagna emerges to the surface for the first time in her life – her decision cutting all her bonds with her family – Rori and her little party descend to Orzammar once more. Dagna has tried to find us a guide but failed. Obviously most dwarves think it is suicidal and downright stupid to search for Branka. „Told me I was sounding like Oghren, that's what they did,“ Dagna growls. „I am so sorry I couldn't help you. “

„Don't worry, Dagna, we'll manage,“ Rori assures her before she can become completely devastated for having failed her heroine. Dagna has already done so much for us. Without her we'd be still figuring our way around Orzammar. It is incredible how huge this city is – and hard to imagine how great the dwarven realm had to be before the darkspawn tore it down. The Grey Wardens have their own headquarters in Orzammar. Even without being closed down, surfacers aren't often allowed into the city. Merchants stay at the merchant's guild, tourists are non-existent and ambassadors either live in the palace or one of the noble houses. The Grey Wardens are an exception to the rule. They are the only surfacers who are always welcomed. The dwarves never forget about the darkspawn as they are right there at their front door.

„Stranger!“ We turn at the sound of a deep, slightly slurred voice calling us. Within a crowd of dwarves we are easily detected. We tower over them. Even Rori. The voice belongs to a strangely familiar redhead dwarf with a braided beard. „Have you seen a Grey Warden hereabouts? I've been privy to the rumour that he... or was it she - you understand this was many mugs ago – was searching for Branka on Lord Harrowmont's own command – or was it Bhelen?“

The dwarf reeks of alcohol. He's drunk as a lord. Now he mentions Branka, I recall where we've seen him before. He was - Surprise! Surprise! - drunken and he wasn't wearing any trousers. He obviously does not remember us.

„A Grey Warden? What does that Grey Warden look like?“ Rori grins, shaking her head at the besotted fellow. She keeps her distance, though, clearly remembering him, too.

„Stout and muscular, fair of face, but with a strong jaw and bold nose...“

Everybody turns their eyes on me. „Those dwarves know rugged handsomeness when they see it. “ I grin, throw my head back as I run my fingers through my hair and... prance. Vain? Who? I? Noooooo!

.....surrounded by a great glowing nimbus. “
„Only if idiocy glowed,“ Morrigan snorts.

HEY!

„If she's a woman, she might be more slight but her eyes will shine with the light of purity and her large but chaste bosom will heave magnificently.“

Everybody turns their eyes on Rori's boobs. „Hey! Did you miss the part about the eyes?“ she pouts, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

„With boobs as the dwarf describes them who would even get to notice the light of purity in her eyes?“ Zevran wonders out loud as he leers at Rori's bosom. He has a point there. I still scowl at him for ogling my woman.

„I've been looking for hours but I haven't seen anybody who looks like that. Very frustrating.“ The dwarf sighs and scans the area again for the glowing-in-the-dark superheroes. I wouldn't mind if I glowed. It's pitch black dark in the Deep Roads. Glowing would come in quite handy. One would also save a whole lot of candles... On a second thought, being a walking, talking beacon would make for a perfect target for any ambush... If one could switch that glow off... how cool would that be?

„You might want to look right here.“ Rori snaps her fingers in front of the dwarf's face. He turns and scrutinizes her thoroughly.

„Nah!“ he finally grunts in mere disbelief. „You're no more than a little gal. You're mucking me about!“

„I wish I was,“ Rori sighs. „Alistair and I are the only Grey Wardens here – actually the only Grey Wardens in Ferelden."

„Well, if you are the best they've got, then standards must have fallen way down...“

„You are one to talk,“ Rori snorts. „You're not exactly a Paragon yourself!“

The dwarf stays completely unperturbed by her comment. „At least they were right about the bosom. That truly is large... and it heaves...“ He smacks his lips and gets lost in the close inspection of Rori's breasts. „Say, can I ask you a favour?“ he finally asks, saving himself from having Rori punch him in the face for gawking at her indeed large breasts.

„That's how you butter up people when you want to ask them for a favour?“ Rori laughs – which causes her bosom to truly heave magnificently. „Well, why not? Everyone else does. So feel free to bother me as well."

„Name's Oghren, and if you ever heard of me before, it's probably all been about how I piss ale and kill little boys who look at me wrong,“ the dwarf introduces himself with a grunted laugh. „And that's mostly true...“

„Charming,“ Rori mutters.

„...but the part they never say is how I'm the only one still trying to save our only Paragon. And if you're looking for Branka, I'm the only one who knows what she was looking for, which might be pretty sodding helpful in finding her."

„Let me have a guess, you want to come along? Don't I have enough armed lunatics following me already?“ Rori groans.
"Perfect," the dwarf chuckles. "What's one more?"

"He has a point there," I agree. "He fits in nicely. And you were looking for a guide. Here you got one."

"He is drunk." Rori wrinkles her nose. She is not particularly fond of the dwarf. "How good can a drunken guide be?"

"You should be more worried about me being sober, gal," the dwarf drones.

"Well, he hasn't yet tried to murder us. And he's the only guide available. The archdemon won't patiently pick its nose while it waits for us running around the Deep Roads. Either running around the Deep Roads aimlessly and hope to stumble over Branka, or running around the Deep Roads with a hammered guide – not the best choices but we've done more with less.

"Branka was a brilliant girl but half the time she'd add two and two and make it fifty. You want to find her, you need someone who knows how she thinks." Oghren tips his index finger to his forehead.

"I take it you trying to find Branka is somewhat connected to that heartshaped tatoo with her name on your buttocks?" Rori asks, sighing as she accepts her fate in form of a drunken dwarf joining our little party.

"Aye, how you know about that?" Oghren gasps, staring at her in awe.

"Grey Warden awesomeness. We got some special skills, you know. Don't let yourself get deceived by the looks."

"You can see right through my clothes?" The dwarf doesn't sound shocked at all by the prospect. Quite the contrary. "See me naked? Me and little Oghren?"

"Little who...? Oh, never mind! And no! I cannot see through your clothes. The mere idea is just... gross. So, no need to get excited. Maker!" Rori rolls her eyes.

Zevran offers a far warmer welcome than my ginger. "Hello my stocky little friend!" he cheers.

"Huh." The dwarf rakes his drunken eyes over the elf in utter confusion. "You got small breasts for a gal."

"Ah. This is where we begin the typical dwarven-elven rivalry, is it?" Something that's totally awesome about Zevran: it seems absolutely impossible to insult him. Or maybe that's just what he wants you to believe and in secret he counts all the moments when you hurt his feelings and once the score is high, he slices your throat while you're sleeping. I can't decide. He's just too sneaky.

"Nahhh." Oghren waves him off. "Now let's go. Branka is not going to find herself."

Later we all try to pack our backpacks for our trip to the Deep Roads. We can only take with us what we can carry and only carry as much as won't become a hindrance in battle. In Rori's case that's almost nothing. Cursing she stuffs several towels into her already crammed backpack.

"What do you need those for?" I wonder with growing amusement. I've watched her pack for a while now. I'd offer some advice, but I like my head where it is and don't need it to be bitten off by a bitchy ginger. She'll discover sooner or later that an extra pair of socks is a luxury she cannot afford.

"I'm a woman, remember? Women have to deal with womenly things every now and then," she
snaps as she tries to close her backpack. She cannot even lift it off the ground. And when I give her a hand she topples over and lies on her back like an upsidedown beetle. „Hmph,“ she grumps, kicking at me when I burst into laughter. But all she manages is some helpless flailing. I take pity in her and help her back to her feet. Then I take even more pity in her and pack some of the things she cannot carry.

„You do not need any extra clothes,“ I point out.

„We're going to be down there for weeks!“ Rori shudders.

„Starve or stink. Your choice, kitten. You cannot carry both clothes and food."

„Hmph."

Well, you get the impression.

On the evening before our departure, we all sit together in the great hall of the Grey Warden's Orzammar headquarters, discussing Mission Branka.

Oghren proves more useful than we all expected. He thinks we have a five day walk until we reach Ortan Thaig. Maybe seven depending on the difficulties we meet. He can point out places where to find fresh water and he can decipher the dwarven runes.

„What about the darkspawn sensing us?“ Rori asks, frowning worriedly. „Won't they all come running for us?"

„I really don't know. Usually they would, but the Blight could come in handy for once. Most darkspawn are on the surface or farther south. At least I do hope so.“ We'll go in deep, though. I am worried, too. We can sense the darkspawn just like they can sense us. Unfortunately there's only two of us and thousands of them.

„Does Morrigan still have some of the stuff we used back in the Korcari Wilds to fool the darkspawn?“

„Speaking of Morrigan... that potion she made, how much protection does it offer?“ Zevran inquires. He has been quite a pest ever since we began to prepare for our trip. First I didn't really notice, I mean, Zevran talking about things normal people don't talk about, that's a constant background noise. But the closer we get to the hour of our departure, the more obstrusive he becomes.

„It's like an armour,“ Rori explains. „It offers some protection but it does not make you immune. You could still be infected. If that happened the potion would slow down the deadliness of the taint but it would not stop it."

The elf pales visibly. He sits there on his chair and is so silent I almost worry he could be ill. No juicy details about his love life, no attempts of hitting on any present female, no jokes about Wynne's bosom... it's so unlike him.

„Honesty would not have been my first choice,“ the witch mutters, rolling her eyes at Rori.

„I don't want to lie to you. This mission could turn out as suicidal. We do not know where Branka went or how many darkspawn are still down there. I will not force any of you to follow Alistair and me. It's your own decision...“

„I've sworn an oath...“ Zevran mumbles.
„It still is your decision, Zev,“ Rori says softly, squeezing the elf's hand reassuringly. „I would not ask you to do anything you do not want to do."

The elf stares at her as if she has sprouted a second head. „Well, that's a premier,“ he slurs in his thick accent, attempting rather unsuccessfully to return to his often unnerving and importunate cheerfulness. Rori says, it's his shield. Like mine is my humour. To see this shield coming down, it's almost shocking. He has to be scared out of his mind at the mere thought of entering the Deep Roads.

It's only a moment, though, and then he's back to his old exaggerated self, telling tales about Orzammar's whorehouses. You can't find a single boardinghouse in this city but Zevran claims he's found and visited twelve whorehouses in two days.

„Twelve in two days? How in the name of the Maker... no, wait, forget I even asked!“ When will I ever learn to keep my mouth shut?

„Alistair, my dear friend, there's roots you might want to chew...“ Zevran begins, helpful as always. „I said forget about that question!“

„It can help with your stamina...“

„I have no problems with my stamina, thank you very much,“ I snap.

„You sure?“

„Yes, yes, he is sure,“ Rori jumps in on our conversation.

„You're probably right. With all the nightly exertions you hardly get any sleep anymore, poor girl. You have to be rather sore most of the time. I have an ointment you might want to rub on your womanhood after it suffered from the penetration of certain objects... “

„Err... we're not really discussing this, are we?“ Rori squeaks, frantically looking around for an escape route. It's only Zevran and us in the hall, though. The others have left to prepare dinner. We're going to have a feast tonight. Leliana's lute already lies on the table next to Rori's fiddle.

Whoa! No, we really don't want to discuss this with the lecherous elf! It's totally private and... Then I recall Rori shares girl talk with Leliana about stuff I would never share with anybody. „What's wrong? You have no problems discussing my manhood's size with Leliana,“ I comment in a low voice.

„Now... that's something totally different...,“ Rori begins, blushing violently. Oh, how she squirms. She's so cute when she's bashful. .... and I did not... I didn't say anything about... I... listen, there was this cucumber when we prepared dinner... and it had about the same size as... and so I wondered...“
She kneads her fingers and grins sheepishly. „I mean, I don't know much about that... I have nothing to compare it with... and it is huge! Your... aehm... not the cucumber... well, the cucumber, too, or I wouldn't have been reminded...“

„Rori...“

„Yes?“ she cheeps.

„Shush.“ Earthworms. Cucumbers. I wonder what comes next. Sighing I pull her close and place a soft kiss on her lips. Rori answers with her own boisterous passion, turning my innocent caress into something steamy, tongues twining in a lustful dance.
“Oh, don’t you worry about me. Just keep acting as if I wasn't there,” Zevran chuckles. The sound of his voice makes us jump. „I was looking for that darling mage anyway. Now... where is Wynne? My manhood is itching and it looks funny...“

„It looks funny?” Rori asks naively before I can stop her. She will regret this. I will regret this. Dearly...

„Yeah, here, look!“

„NOOOO!” Rori and I wail but it's already too late. Only Zevran can unpack his most private parts that fast. And only Zevran would do so in front of everybody and their dog.

„Andraste's flaming sword! Ewww!“ Both Rori and I stare in horrified fascination at that... thing... Zevran has produced from within his pants. It looks awfully hurtful. I cringe at the mere sight. For once the elf has my full-hearted sympathy.

„Is that... um... normal?“ Rori croaks.

„Nope,“ Zevran laughs. „Not at all, my innocent Fereldan rose. Where is that lovely lady mage... oh, my darling Wynne!“ He beams at the passing by granny and beckons her over.

„What is it now? I am not your darling and no, you cannot rest your head at my bosom,“ Wynne snaps, stopping to see what we are all staring at. „ Seriously?“ she snorts.

„I am afraid it requires your healing hands to help me recover,“ Zevran sighs, sounding utterly blitheful at the prospect. „Rub it with some salve...“

„I am not going to touch this,“ Wynne says firmly. „You can rub it yourself.“

„You are deeply hurting my feelings, you know. I had a sad childhood...“ the elf chuckles as he follows the fleeing mage. Thankfully only after he put everything back into his trousers.

Strangely when you know your chances of going to die are higher than your chances to survive, life tastes so sweet. Sure, we have one foot in our graves all the time. If there's no darkspawn, there's Loghain's bullies or dragons or demons or bloodmages... The list of those wanting to kill us is quite long.

This night we laugh and sing together – well, Oghren does not sing, at least not for long because Shale threatens to smash his head like a grape should he continue to howl. But the rest of us. Even Sten! I'd never have thought he can actually sing. We eat together, we drink together. We talk and we dance... Well, I don't. I cannot dance. I have the grace of a drunken ogre when it comes to dancing. I stomp on feet. It's rather hurtful. Rori plays her fiddle, Leliana her lute. Oghren turns a set of pots into drums.

That time we spend together... I'm reminded of my dead brothers, those fellow Grey Wardens who died at Ostagar. I'm reminded of Duncan, how he was a Grey Warden in heart and soul and how he accepted this burden without allowing it to weigh him down. It makes me sad to think of him, despite all my good memories. He always was kind to me. He took care of me. He believed in me. And I so wanted to make him proud. I wonder what he'd say if he was here with us.

Suddenly it's too loud and crowded in here. I need some space for myself. Some time to wallow in my memories. The grief returns every now and then. Rori understands. The loss of her parents still haunts her. The uncertainty about her brother's fate is even worse.

I slip out of the door, closing it carefully behind me. The vast entrance hall is cast in gloom and
shadows, only illuminated by a few lanterns. Like everything dwarves build, the Grey Wardens' headquarters are huge. I wonder why. Even I feel dwarfed by the immense size of the buildings and statues.

Here there are statues, too. So many of them line the way down the hall like guards of honour. Each one is the silent memorial of a Grey Warden that has passed away a long time ago. Men and women, humans, elves and dwarves, mages and warriors. Every single one of them died in the Deep Roads. The dwarves honoured them by crafting these statues – and still, it's only the Grey Wardens to truly remember them. Nobody really cares as long as there's no Blight. I pass by the long row of former Wardens, their cold dead eyes staring back at me. It makes me shudder. At the walls behind the statues there's huge stone plates with the names of many more engraved. I run my fingers across the letters carved into the stone.

The last plate in the row is only half covered with the names of the dead. I step closer and squint my eyes to read the last entries.

Bregan, Warden Commander of Orlais, 9:10 Dragon.

Genevieve, Warden Commander of Orlais, 9:10 Dragon.

Kell ap Morgan, Senior Warden, 9:10 Dragon.

The list is longer... Julien, Nicolas, Hafter... all of them went into the Deep Roads twenty years ago and none of them returned.

Now, ain't I looking forward to go down there? There's a good chance Rori's and my name will be the next on this list.

I turn at the soft sound of footsteps echoing through the vast hall. The door to the dinning hall is ajar, the warm glow of the fire and the distant sound of music flow into the gloom of this memorial room. Rori comes to stand beside me, examining the plate as I did before, her fingertips caressing the names of Wardens long forgotten.

The music crescendoes, Leliana's sweet voice rings throughout the darkness. Rori turns away from the memorial. Her face is cast in shadows, only her eyes glitter in the dim light, reflecting the glow of the fire. „Dance with me,“ she whispers as she steps closer, lying her hand to my chest right above my heart.

„Dance? Oh, no, I don't dance. I stomp on feet. Hard.“ I close my hand around hers, squeezing it gently, hoping to lure her thoughts away from dancing. Rori isn't one to give up easily, though. ‟You really enjoy to be handled roughly, don't you?“ I sigh when she tugs at my arm.

„It's not that different from swordplay. You got your different footings for attacking or parrying. Come on, I show you.“

I follow reluctantly when she drags me to the middle of the hall where she arranges both my feet and my arms. ‟Okay, okay, I will try not to cause permanent damage. But I can't promise... just so you don't complain afterwards I didn't warn you." Strangely I find it easy to follow her instructions. I'm a pretty good swordsman and to imagine the steps not as a dance but my fighting stance has me grasp the basics quickly. Soon my grip around her waist tightens and I swirl her around the hall to the rhythm of the music. It's as if we were floating.

Oghren is unable to see how Rori glows, how she's a light in the dark when there is nothing but death, despair and destruction surrounding her. I can see it, astonished by her ravishing beauty in the
midst of so much darkness. I can feel it deep in my heart when her smile chases my personal demons away, when her touch makes my whole being vibrate with liveliness.

There’s no use wasting time on brooding about death when life is so short. The moment I die, I want to look back and see a life in vibrant colours. And Rori will be the brightest of all of them. She’s a whole painting of her own.

This time that’s supposed to be the worst of my life, with the Blight and all, she makes it the happiest I have ever experienced. It’s a paradox. I don’t really understand how all this horror can pale besides Rori. I find myself standing on a battlefield amongst the slain and grin stupidly, my heart seems too big for my chest, bloated with the immense love I feel for her. And the reason for all this is this small ginger with her dark blue eyes and that sweet impish smile.

I never thought this was possible, yet here I am, kissing my beloved fellow Warden passionately in the middle of a memorial of death, loss and sacrifice.

I love her. Oh Maker, how much I love her!
If you have read The Stolen Throne you will find Alistair's experiences in the Deep Roads quite similar to that of his father. That is – of course – not a coincidence. I always thought it quite ironic how much Alistair's parents tried to protect him from leading a life as theirs and how he – depending on the choices of the player – turns out just to lead that life.

„So. With the boss, aye?“

I look up from my bowl of porridge tiredly and find the dwarf wiggling his eyebrows at me as he nods in Rori's direction. With her head resting on the table she has fallen asleep again.

We did go to bed early last night, but we didn't get much sleep. I mean, it could be the last time we made love to each other - since we will enter the Deep Roads today. We aren't exactly... err... picky with the places we choose for our lovemaking... actually not at all... If we were we'd not spend a quarter of the time together doing certain things like... err... licking lamppost... Maker! Rori has become quite an expert in licking lampposts. Solid rock hard lampposts. Not that I have any comparison... still.... Now I want to drag her back to our bedroom... Anyway, the Deep Roads? Really, who would even think about making love while in the Deep Roads? That's just... gross!

„Pardon?“ I mumble, mouth full.

„You and the boss. Rolling your oats.“ Oghren chuckles, smacking his lips. „Hehe.“

„I don't know...“ Oats? Huh? I stare down at my porridge. Is something wrong with it? It looks quite fine to me. And it just tastes like porridge always does... awful. I'd rather have some cheese. Just don't ever try to mix cheese with porridge. Neither the porridge nor the cheese get any better when thrown into a pot together. My companions didn't like that experiment of mine at all. I can't blame them. Rori's bowl of porridge is still untouched. Even asleep she clings to her mug of coffee.

„Polishing the footstones.“ Oghren growls lowly, leaning closer as if he shared a dark secret with me. I lean back as far as possible without falling off the bench. He cannot have been drinking again that early in the morning, can he?

„...what you're...“ What in the name of the Maker is he talking about? Leliana is giggling into her mug, She feeds her porridge to Schmoodles. The pig-rabbit eats anything as long as he can chew it.

Oghren is still grinning at me, showing off all his rather big teeth. There's something stuck in between his incisors. Ew. I am missing something... again, right? Sigh.

„Tapping the midnight still, if you will.“ Now Zevran joins in on Leliana's gigglefit. Morrigan just rolls her eyes and Sten is as unperturbed as always while Wynne chooses to ignore us.

„What are you going on about?“ I groan, narrowing my eyes first at eyebrow-wiggling Oghren, then at Zevran who keeps thrusting his thumb through the circle he has formed with the indexfinger and thumb of his other hand. I stare and shrug. Zevran nods in Rori's direction. I shrug once more.
Leliana almost chokes on her coffee.

„Forging the moaning statue,“ Oghren goes on. „Bucking the forbidden horse. Donning the velvet hat."

Err... this is about... about... I look at my highly amused companions and the drunkenly jovial dwarf in utter confusion. Huh? Oh, no! No! Not again! I get it, I get it. Yes, haha, making fun of stupid Alistair again, aren't you? Why is everybody getting so excited about my love life? Go get one yourself!

„Are you making these up right now?“ I sigh. Just what I needed, one more companion commenting on Rori's and mine exertions, like Zevran would say.

„Nope. Been saving 'em,“ Oghren grunts. „Anyway, good of you, son. A girl and no pants involved, that's exactly what you need.“

„That's what all of us need,“ Zevran sighs, dreamily ogling Morrigan's cleavage.

„You've got more than you can handle, Zevran,“ Wynne scolds. „That's nothing you should be worrying about for a while. You and your lose morals!“

After breakfast I have a last bath and a last shave with Rori – that takes slightly longer than one would expect... okay, much longer. Then we are finally ready. All of us. Even Zevran.

„Yes, I'm in. Just one thing I want to have done before climbing down into that ancient graveyard of old dwarven ruins...“ Thus said, the elf grabs Rori around her waist, pulls her flush against his chest and, before she can as much as yelp, he kisses her. Like for real.

Whoa! Whoa! Elf, the darkspawn is not what you should be worried about right now!

„Sorry,“ the Antivan bastard slurs once he lets go of the completely shocked, utterly stunned and downright dumbfounded ginger. „I just had to do that once at least. You can't blame me, can you?“

„I really do hope for you that's the only thing you have to do with her at least once,“ I growl, pulling Rori away from him. „You're trespassing.“

„Feeling a bit territorial, are you?“ Zevran grins while Rori, clinging to me, still blinks and stares and gasps, trying to recover from the unexpected assault. „Well, there's nothing you should worry about, my dear friend. She's all yours for always and forever - if you don't mess it up, that is.“

Charming.

„You kissed me!“ Rori breathes, still utterly shocked. „He kissed me!“

„We all noticed, my dear;“ Wynne comments, pulling a face. „I'd brush my teeth thoroughly if I were you. With that elf you never know where he stuck this tongue of his before. And if you notice something itchy...“

„You're kidding! She's kidding, right?“ Rori pulls a grimace of utter disgust. She sticks out her tongue, ogling it cross-eyed.

„Oh, Wynne, my darling, there's no need to get jealous...“ Zevran laughs amiably.

„Jealous? Keep dreaming,“ Wynne snorts.

„Don't you listen to that mage, my sweet Fereldan rose. And forgive my boldness. It will not happen
again.” He grins apologetical at both me and Rori. „Now, the Deep Roads before I change my mind.“

Yes. The Deep Roads. For two days we walk without any sign of darkspawn. The vast passage with the grand pillars is magnificent. Even after so many centuries most of the buildings and statues are still standing in all their magnitude. On the third day – not that we could tell if it’s night or day in this everlasting darkness – we discover the first darkspawn corruption and soon afterwards the first darkspawn. Nothing we couldn’t handle but we can still call ourselves lucky for having Wynne with her healing spells in our party.

Soon afterwards the corruption becomes worse. It’s awfully fleshy and slimy, it stinks and when you have to walk through it, there’s this disgusting sucking sound whenever you lift your foot for the next step.

Gross.

Next to signs of Branka passing through we also discover that my sword – formerly Maric's – makes the darkspawn recoil. The ancient dwarven runes on the pale dragonbone blade glow in a bright sapphire light, and when I testingly touch the blade to the tainted wall, the fleshy substance retreats. That's real cool. And disturbing. And... ewww... what is this corruption after all? Does it... live? Better not think about it!

„Now, that is a sexy sword,“ Zevran comments. „Wielded by a sexy man,“ he adds with a very toothy grin reserved for me alone. I wryly grin back, edging away from the elf. He's somewhat scary. I don't feel sexy after three days unwashed and – worse – unshaved, although Oghren keeps telling me I finally start looking like a man.

„My sexy man,“ Rori remarks, wrapping her arms around my waist as she beams up at me.

„Eww.“ Morrigan shudders. „And there I thought there could be nothing more gross down here than the darkspawn.“

„You both are so incredibly territorial,“ Zevran sighs, shaking his head sadly. „I take it you've never even thought about a threesome or partner exchange?“

A what? „Err... no?“

We have finally discovered the route to Ortan Thaig. The progress is slower than we hoped, still Rori wants to set up camp again for some rest as long as we don't face more darkspawn activity. Shale tries to smash the darkspawn corruption by stomping on it while the rest of us tries to get as comfortable as possible.

„It grows on stones, so it could also grow on a golem, right?“ I wonder out loud. „Then you would be all covered in that fleshy substance, becoming some kind of flesh creature yourself, soft on the outside with a tough core.“

The golem glares at me and steps away from the fleshy overgrowth, trying to wipe its feet off at some not yet covered stones.

It's as silent down here as it is dark. Sometimes there's the sound of water or the clicking noises of the giant spiders that cause Rori to tremble and urge us to move faster whenever we hear them. „So, Shale... when you were standing there all that time? Did you... sleep?“ I aim for some pleasant conversation to break the silence as I watch the golem hop around on one foot to examine the other.

„I have no need to sleep,“ the golem grumbles. „My body does not tire or do... ugh... other flesh-
related functions.” Its eyes follow Oghren as he drops his pants and, grunting loudly, relieves himself right next to our makeshift camp. The ladies don't exactly react fondly. I can't blame them. Even Barkley's manners are better. At least with the dwarf around Wynne will not find the habits I have picked up that horrendous anymore. They pale in comparison to Oghren's.

„Why did you never tell?“ Rori gasps overhearing my conversation with Shale.

„It never asked.“ The golem shrugs, watching with growing amusement the argument taking place between Wynne and Oghren. The dwarf will find himself beaten up anytime soon. My bet is on the granny mage.

„First and only watch: Shale!“ Rori declares without any further arguing. „And move the camp away from that... mess!“

„But don't you get bored?“ I wonder. What does one do with all the time when one does not sleep? Or do any other flesh-related things. It doesn't eat or drink. It doesn't hug anybody... uhm... I guess, we can be quite happy about that. Well, it hugs that sapphire Rori allowed it to keep. And that cuddling stone she purchased for Shale back at Denerim. Shale calls it Herbert. Says it reminds it of some villager that used to wipe it off after the birds came. „Wouldn't you want to dream, at least?“

„I do not dream.“ Shale says matter-of-factly. „This is what it does when it sleeps? It paws its nose and mumbles incoherently.“

„I do not...“ I begin irritatedly.

„Oh you do! It's so cute!“ Rori squeals, kissing my cheek.

„But, yes, of course, I thought we all...“ Wait! I get how Rori would know what I do when I sleep... but Shale? „Huh?... you watch me?“

„I watch all closely when they are still at night. There is little else to do.“ The golem shrugs.

Creepy! „For hours and hours?“ I croak.

„I count the breaths, it helps to overcome the overwhelming urge to crush their faces while they sleep,“ the golem muses.

„Well, I won't be doing much of that anymore,“ I mutter. I suddenly don't feel that tired anymore. Being watched by that creepy statue all night long. Being totally at its mercy... „Err... Rori? About Shale keeping watch...“

Ortan Thaig. Not so many darkspawn. Far too many spiders.

The moment we step out of the passage and pass the broken gates that lead to the forgotten thaig, the webs become obvious, covering the walls and – as far as we can tell the ceiling above. There's signs of skeletons entangled in the ghostly webs, some of them by animals unknown, some darkspawn, some dwarves.

Traveling has weighed our spirits down. Everybody is taciturn and feeling uneasy. We walk as fast as we can manage, Rori and I both tense, reaching out with our Grey Warden senses to detect the darkspawn before it detects us. Strangely they do not seem bothered with us at all. When we cannot avoid a confrontation, the darkspawn will attack – but they do not come for us. Not like Duncan said they would when telling of his experiences in the Deep Roads. He said, once they knew there was a Grey Warden, they would let all the others know, their group consciousness alarming the whole rest of the horde. We can only assume it's because of the Blight that they take no interest in us.
The spiders, however, do not follow the archdemon. For them we are some fresh juicy snack walking right into their lair.

Rori stands at the entrance and her whole body just trembles. She'd happily fight a whole horde of darkspawn and abominations instead. But spiders... We can call ourselves lucky that the archdemon is a dragon, were it a spider, Rori would have run for the hills by now.

The mere sight of the arachnoids paralyses her, when they come for us as soon as we are well into the thaig, huge shadows from above, dangling over our heads as they try to crush us beneath them. The clicking noises their mandibles make, their large misshapen bodies, glistening black in the magic light of the staffs. And worst of all their legs, long and hairy and skittering across the stones.

The clicking noises grow louder and louder until suddenly a huge creature drops from the ceiling with a soft thud at the very spot where only seconds before Zevran stood. The elf cartwheels himself out of the way just in time, Sten, walking right behind him, reacts to his cry of alarm by greeting the spider with his long sword. More hairy bodies fall from the ceiling, aiming to separate us. I stay close to Rori, her attacks lacking her natural grace as her fear overpowers her.

„Fight!“ I shout at her and whatever it is in my voice, she moves, visibly pulling herself together. I slam my shield at the side of a spider's head, causing it to tumble as I follow after it to slice my sword through the glistening chitin. White liquid gushes from the wound when I withdraw my blade.

Next to me Rori screams as she is suddenly lifted off the ground by something from above. I try to grab her but she's already too high to reach her, struggling to get free from the gossamer by hitting at it with her dagger. But she only gets herself entangled worse.

„Morrigan!“ I shout and the witch reacts instantly, shooting a fiery bolt from the tip of her staff. The strands that hold Rori get scorched and she comes tumbling down, my attempt to catch her sending us both to the ground. The spiders are upon us within a heartbeat.

Our companions charge at the same time. Zevran pulls us both back to our feet while Oghren, Shale, Sten and the dog keep the spiders at distance with the help of the mages and the archer. Oghren is pushed down by a spider, clicking its poisonous fangs at him frantically. He headbutts it, gripping it's first two legs and hauls it across the floor. Morrigan fires a spell at a spider looming over her, the blast hitting the creatures soft belly. It comes crushing down and the witch's next blast goes amiss, setting the webs on fire. Moments later we find ourselves trapped in an inferno as the flames spread with lightning speed, black scorching strands raining down on our heads.

We run. The spiders run, too. Thankfully they are more concerned with saving their own lives than with hunting us. Their screeches sound even louder than the roaring of the fire. The smoke is pitch black and thick, almost suffocating. We cough and choke, blinded by the smoke. I grab around for Rori's hand, dragging her along as she stumbles. I follow the shouts and cries ahead, hoping they will lead us somewhere safe.

I am breathing liquid fire, the seething heat boring right into my lungs. It's unbearable and I am slowed down by the weight of Rori having collapsed in my arms. Then both I and Rori are lifted off the ground and I find myself thrown over a broad, hard shoulder.

„Useless weak flesh creatures,“ the golem grumbles as it stomps off with us.

With mere luck we make it inside one of the large mansions, dominated by a huge blackened dome. I cannot tell if that's its original colour. It looks more like it's covered in soot and ashes. Shale struggles to push the stone door close while the rest of us collapses on the floor, gasping desperately for air.
The golem just stands there and watches us spit out ashes and cough soot from our tormented lungs. Even Sten this time has a hard time to recover. Shale sighs a few times loudly and ostentatiously while it endures our disgraceful display of flesh-related disfunction.

We stay inside the dome, waiting for the fire to burn out. There's some fresh air flowing in from somewhere and breathing becomes easier after some time. We find the remains of an old campfire not so far away from the entry. Luckily we also find some water there, fresh and not poisoned by the taint it fills a large basin farther inside the huge building. The cool water eases the burning in my throat. It feels damn good to wash the soot from my face. We take turns washing ourselves – Rori and I volunteering for the last turn as we can spend undisturbed time together that way.

„So... any bets on how long it takes Roristair to get going again?“ we hear Zevran say once we leave our companions back at the campfire lit in the same place as the one that was lit here the Maker only knows how many years ago.

„Uhm, get out of the armour, get cleaned... ten minutes?“ Leliana guesses.

Hey! I can't believe they are making bets on that! Doesn't anybody have any respect for privacy anymore these days?

„Oh, come on! We are in the middle of the Deep Roads, we almost got killed by a swarm of giant spiders... they won't...“ Wynne says, her voice fading away quickly. „Fifteen minutes,“ she finally mutters. „Give them some time to comfort each other before.“

„Huh? The templar boy and the boss, aye? Hehe. Good on them,“ Oghren grunts. Pause. Long pause. „Mhm... Aye, sure. Why not?“

„Pardon?“ Wynne's voice sounds insinuating.

„Oh, I'd give you a roll. Why not?“ The dwarf chuckles and smacks his lips, a wet, quite disgusting sound.

„A 'roll'?“ Wynne asks indignantly.

„Aye, any time. Preferably in the dark.“ Pause. „It's pretty dark around here, hehe.“

„I suppose I should be flattered,“ Wynne huffs.

„I'm not sure I have the equipment for that, but sure, whatever gets you working,“

„You, dwarf, will never get me working,“ Wynne informs him icily.

Rori tiredly rolls her shoulders when we reach the basin. She's covered in soot from head to toe, her hands are still shaking so badly, I have to help her shed her armour and undo the ties of her blouse. Not that I mind much, although she doesn't make things easier by leaning against me for support when her legs give way.

„Hush, kitten, I don't think they will come back.“

„I've been such a total failure,“ Rori sobs. Even in the dim glow of our makeshift torch I can see the trails of her tears on her blackened skin. „I allowed my fear to paralyse me. These things almost pulled me up into their lair!“ She's shaking so badly, I have to make her sit down.

„We've all been terrified.“ Thankfully whenever entering a battle, I do not have much time to think about all the horrifying details, my fear getting pushed to the background while my instinct of self-
preservation kicks in, joined by my experience on the battlefields. That's what keeps me alive.

„I wet my pants,“ Rori confesses in a very low, very small voice. The way she says this, she's blushing violently under all that black soot.

Awww... cute... somewhat... but only because it's her. Anybody else but Rori... gross! Anyway... I should be hugging her now, shouldn't I? Say something comforting, something soothing, something that doesn't make her feel like a complete idiot...

„Well... wet frocks can have a certain appeal...“ I tease. Not exactly that kind of wet frocks... I'm more thinking about the kind where Rori rises from a bath in the lake, white wet linen sticking to her body... Mmmh... See, I've handled that once more with my usual deft brilliance! Just Rori doesn't seem convinced

„Now you're making fun of me!“ She looks so small. Vulnerable. Everything but the fearless leader everybody wants her to be. And I love her even more for those moments when she's no more but a young woman that stumbled into this mess by mere coincidence. Her strength is not her fearlessness but how she overcomes that fear – sometimes with more, sometimes with less difficulties.

„Perish that thought, my beloved lady. I am the last who'd ever make fun of you. I know about the consequences.“ I wink at her, before I dip a cloth into the basin and wipe the soot off her face, then lean in to kiss her. Giggling, she stops me and returns the favour. „I've seen broadshouldered men, taller, more experienced and stronger than you lose control over their bladder. It's really nothing to be ashamed of... a set of extra clothes would come in handy now, though.“

„You know, one can wash them."

„Really? Now, that's news to me. I should give it a try with my socks, shouldn't I?"

So we wash everything, clothes, armours, boots – us. I like the last part best. The water is icy. I wouldn't recommend taking a bath, but standing naked in front of each other and wiping each other clean from head to toe with wet cloths... maybe that day isn't as bad as I thought it to be...

„I think my breasts are quite clean now, Alistair,“ Rori snickers when I run the cloths around her soft mounds for the tenth time. She is one to talk! I am quite sure I can't get any cleaner anymore... and she's practically... polishing my... uhm... sword... Maker! I already begin to sound like Oghren!

„Mmmh? Oh? I don't think so... there's still a smudge right there...“ Thus said, I bend down and tenderly suck her left nipple into my mouth. No, not clean at all. Quite dirrrty...

„Now you mention it,“ Rori gasps, grabbing my shoulder with one hand for support, while her other hand tightens its grip around my length. „Ohhhh... Maker!“

All those things I said about making love in the Deep Roads... forget about them...

Her hot moist mouth explores my heated body, mine is all over hers, sucking and licking, trailing bites and kisses across each others exposed skin. Rori gasps at the rasping sensation of my stubles against her sensitive skin, so soft and smooth against my lips.

Bent forward over the rim of the basin, Rori arches her back delicately when I plunge into her from behind. Our shadows, cast at the wall in the dim glow of the torch, mimic our lewd act, our moans and the sound of flesh meeting flesh echo in the vast hall.

It's been days since we last made love to each other. Days of gloom and tension as we descended deeper and deeper into the endless darkness of the graveyards of the lost dwarven kingdoms. It's
been days of fear and trouble without enough sleep or food or drink.

The whole tension is broken now, flooded into this one intense act of two lovers together. It's the best comfort we can give each other.

In addition to that it's just mindnumbingly hot, a sensation that sizzles through my entire body until I see stars swim in front of my eyes. I roar her name same time as she cries out mine. Collapsing on top of her, I almost have us both tumble head over heels into the basin. We splash around a lot of icy water, Rori squeaks and giggles, I snicker stupidly.

"Don't know about you, but my day is looking up already," I sigh contently. Maker, life is so damn beautiful in moments like this!

"So, uh, what did you do with her legs?" Oghren greets me when Rori and I return to the campfire with our broadly grinning companions having gathered around it.

"Whose legs?" Maker, what is he going on about now?

"Her legs." He nods at Rori who indeed has very pretty slender and long legs, perfectly shaped with delicate ankles and beautifully curved calves. "That's the problem with dwarven legs. They are useless as an accessory."

"I didn't do anything with them. I don't know what..."

"I'm right here, you know. I have a name and I can hear you," Rori mutters right next to the dwarf.

"Ah, say no more. Just got em outta the way and went about your business," Oghren chuckles, ignoring Rori's icy glare. "Good on you, son."

Blink. Sigh. What in the name of the Maker is wrong with people? Don't they have a life of their own?

"Uhm. Thanks?"

"Oh, sure, just keep acting as if I wasn't there!" Rori rolls her eyes. "Sexist bastards!"
„Didn't you say, ya Grey Wardens sense the darkspawn?“ Oghren grunts as we run down the broad but natural passage as fast as we can. „So, where are they?“

„They are... everywhere!“ Rori pants. „Now shut up and run!“

This is the Dead Trenches, an abandoned, darkspawn infested place. Whatever madness brought Branka here, we cannot be any saner considering we followed her. The only excuse I can find: We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into.

The air we breathe is heavy with dust and decay, the stench is almost unbearable. First I thought I'd get used to it after a while but it still bites in my lungs whenever I inhale the foul stench of the thick corruption surrounding us.

When we descended farther into the Deep Roads, the tingling at the back of my mind became stronger and appeared more often as we encountered more and more darkspawn. And then we reached the point of no return when there suddenly was so many darkspawn behind us, in front of us, right and left and above and beneath – everywhere.

The tingling became worse than during the battle at Ostagar, the darkspawn's presence now infests my mind, it soaks into my thoughts. Sleeping becomes almost impossible and when I collapse with exhaustion the nightmares are worse than ever before. For Rori it isn't any better. Not that any of us is feeling quite well at the moment.

Where all this darkspawn suddenly comes from, I don't know. They are in every tunnel, every passage. It's as if they follow a call, streaming towards a destination only they know about. They do not really hunt us, but when they see us, they get distracted from their task and we find ourselves in the middle of another fight. Most of the time we try to outrun them as we find out they lose interest in us after a while and move on to do whatever it is they have been doing before we stumble upon them. That is the very only reason why we are still alive. If they really wanted to hunt us down, they'd succeed. There are just too many of them.

Just at that very moment we have another group of darkspawn on our heels, and darkspawn down the left and the right corridor, and darkspawn ahead...

Blast!

When they have almost reached us, they suddenly turn down another corridor although we are right there in front of them. They cannot have missed we are there but still they just walk away.

„What in the name of the Maker...?“

We have no time to wonder, we keep running, hoping beyond hope to get as far away as possible from all the other darkspawn closing in around us.

The tunnel opens so abruptly onto a platform that Rori and I almost tumble over the ridge. I grab her arm to pull her back when she only comes to a halt at the very edge of a deep trench, an underground canyon crammed with darkspawn. It's a slithering mass of bodies, genlocks, hurlocks, shrieks, ogres, all pressed into that narrow passage – that isn't that narrow at all. I mean, it's huge, real broad and... Maker! It has to be thousands of them!

The tingling in the back of my head isn't just a tingling anymore – it is a piercing, stabbing and
altogether unpleasant noise that screams at me to get the fuck out of here quickly. The dissonant humming of the darkspawn itself is almost drowned by the cacophony inside my head. Never before have I seen that much darkspawn in one place. Never before have I felt so many of them. It's overwhelming, mindnumbing – the evil, bad, horrifying type of mindnumbing experiences.

From tunnels at the side of the canyon, from passages and holes, more and more darkspawn joins their kin – and then, with a thundering roar, the archdemon soars through the air. It's right there in front of our very noses, huge and terrifying, its corrupted flesh glistening sickly wet in the dim glow of the lava.

It is a dragon – and yet so unlike the ones we've seen before. Those were somewhat beautiful in a very dangerous and terrifying way. This... thing... monstrosity... it's viperish and mean and... it's evil. Real, real evil. It reeks of evilness. It's the very epitome of evilness, the incarnation of my worst nightmare... Merciful Andraste! I don't think my mind would have been capable of making something like that up on its own.

The corrupted dragon lands on a natural bridge high above the horde below. It roars and the horde answers with an earsplitting, inhuman cry from several thousand throats. It only has to turn its ugly head and it would be staring right at us standing there, small and insignificant. At that moment I feel like a tiny, tiny midge - and I guess that's just what I am to that beast. An inconvenience not to be bothered with.

No wonder the darkspawn didn't care we were there. We aren't a danger to them, we aren't worth the effort of being slain – not when there are more important things to do. Like a meeting with the big boss, the destruction of Ferelden, the end of the world... well, business as usual when you are darkspawn.

„Voilà!“ Rori says triumphantly, her voice shaking as she grins maniacally at Sten once the archdemon has risen again and, flying low above the horde, leads its minions... well, whereever they go. Probably to the surface. Maker have mercy! „My strategy worked! We went north until it became south again and are right at the rear of the archdemon...“

„I was wrong,“ Sten admits as calm and unperturbed as usual. Everybody else – well, not Shale – but all the rest of us – and not Oghren – but really, everybody besides Shale, Oghren and Sten... we all look like we have or are about to wet our pants. Leliana is whispering prayers. Good, we need any divine assistance we can get. I'm not particularly picky right now.

„We should find that dwarven smith,“ Sten adds after a moment as Rori hasn't yet moved but gasps „Fuck!“ repeatedly under her breath.

„Yes, no more time to waste,“ Rori agrees. She takes my hand for support as we move on. „My knees are so wobbly,“ she breathes, her face ashen.

„And you think mine aren't?“ I whisper. Her hand in mine is shaking as badly as my own. „They feel like pudding, wobbly, slimy pudding."

„Vanilla or chocolate?“

„Left knee vanilla, right one chocolate. The consistence doesn't vary. Well, perhaps the right one is a little wobblier than the left. Apparently my left knee is the more courageous one.“

„What the fuck are you talking about, you silly nutcases?“ Morrigan hisses from behind. „Keep moving. I want to get the fuck out of here!“
We force our pudding legs to walk us even deeper into the Deep Roads. It sounds more and more like the dumbest idea we ever had. Sure, Branka went down here with her whole House in tow – still... Could they really have survived in this corrupted and darkspawn infested area for so long? What do they eat? Where do they find fresh water? Do I even want to know?

No time for brooding though as we run straight into more darkspawn – and dwarves. Unfortunately it's not Branka. That would have been too easy, right?

„The Legion gives no quarter. Send 'em to the Stone!“ the commander of the group shouts as about fifty men and women roar in unison and throw themselves at the hideous creatures.

„Can't we for once just stand back and watch?“ Zevran groans when Shale – the only one not tired, sore, injured or just utterly depressed - lunges itself into battle. „I have so much ichor in my hair, it's completely ruined! I doubt there's enough conditioner in Thedas to repair it. “

„We must have killed thousands of them already!“ Leliana exclaims, firing an arrow at the approaching creatures. „Where in the name of the Maker do they all come from?“

„Honestly? We don't know. Perhaps they grow like the corruption,“ I wonder, absentmindedly pushing a short genlock down with my shield. „Like little darkspawn mushrooms. Huge fields of them. And when they are all grown up, the other darkspawn come and harvest them. “

„Atrast vala, Grey Warden. I’ve never seen one of your kind in the Deep Roads,“ the commander of the dwarves, a competent fellow called Kardol, greets us once all darkspawn are dead. Well, at least those that happened to be right here.

„And now there's even two of us!“ Rori cheers, causing the dwarf to chuckle. „You don't seem surprised, though to see us here. “

„You're the leader of this... group, gal?“ Kardol eyes us and our companions in all our weird glory. „Bit young, aren't you?“ It's the typical Rori-effect. People feel the urge to behave all parental around her. Rori often pouts when this happens – which makes her look even younger. That doesn't mean she cannot mercilessly use this to her advantage. I've seen her do so more often than once. „The coming Blight is obvious to us, you know,“ the dwarf goes on while we cross the now darkspawn-freed bridge to a huge fortress that Oghren identifies as Bownammar.

„Less darkspawn down here?“ I observe. It's still more than enough left, though. There has to be a nest somewhere. „Everybody packing and getting ready for an adventure vacation on the surface? The all inclusive package with a grand tour of Ferelden, slaying helpless farmers, burning down villages, you know, all the fun stuff. “

„You got it, lad. The surprise is not that you have come but that you have come in that small a number. Where's the rest of your order? The two of you, you cannot have been Wardens for long? Do your moms know what you are doing?“

Hey! I'm a man not a boy! A full grown, broadshouldered, manly man with a fuzzy manly beard... Maker! I so wish I could shave that thing off!... and I have a totally manly and long glow-in-the-dark sword... and I have an intimate relationship with a woman... err... of course it's with a woman... what else should it be with... anyway, I am not a child! Just so you know.

„Well... Ferelden has kind of run out of Grey Wardens...,“ Rori mutters as she combs her fingers through her filthy hair. Zevran isn't the only one with a serious hair problem. Worst of all is Oghren's beard – he still claims beards are the most important accessory of a warrior. Did I mention, I so can't wait to get rid of mine? It feels as if I have some kind of fluffy – very sticky, very dirty, very smelly,
very dead - animal glued to my face. „We're the only ones left. Everybody else is dead."

„Sucks to be you, kiddos.“

„No kidding.“ Rori mutters. „We need to find Paragon Branka. You know anything useful about her?“

„Who put this dull idea into your head, gal? Oh, wait! The honourable lords and ladies, right? Can't decide who should be the new ass on the throne. Tell you something, gal. You're wasting your time. Paragon Branka is dead. Past our line the darkspawn kill everything. You want to go digging blind, you go right ahead, gal.“

„So I take it there's no use asking you for your assistance?“ Rori sighs.

„I'd gladly lead an assault through the Dead Trenches,“ Kardol drones. „But without an ass on the throne we have no orders.“

„Just awesome, isn't it?“ Rori groans, rubbing her face tiredly. She chews her bottom lip while she tries to decide what to do next. We've come so far but it wasn't a stroll in the park. Nothing we couldn't have handled, although Ortan Thaig was tough and I do not know if we had managed without Morrigan accidentally setting the whole place on fire.

Everybody is looking at Rori. They don't say it out loud but their expectant „What now?“ is weighing her down even without being voiced. I really don't want to walk in her shoes right now.

Standing close to the edge of the trench, Rori kicks small stones over the rim. „We've already come so far. If we turn back now, we have gained nothing at all but a few more nightmares,“ she groans when I come to stand beside her – and immediately step back.

Whoa! Maker! That trench is deep! Quickly I pull Rori away from the edge, the momentum driving her into my arms as she turns at the same moment. She rests her head against my shoulder, closing her eyes when I embrace her.

„If we move on we could all die,“ she whispers, her breath hot against my skin. „Or at least some of us – and in the end we could find out Branka really died or we could find nothing at all. Oh, Alistair, what should I do?“

She's asking me? Out of all her companions she chooses Ser Indecisive to give her advice? Duh, I already feel overextended when I have to decide what to eat for lunch. Good thing I didn't have much of a choice there lately. And still she looks at me so expectantly with those large dark blue eyes, two shimmering orbs in her dirt-stained face.

„We've been digging blind ever since Ostagar,“ I mutter in a choked voice. „Everywhere we went, there was trouble awaiting us. We could have died in Redcliffe when you decided to defend the village. We could have died in Kinloch Hold when we entered a tower sealed by the templars because they had lost control over rampant bloodmages and abominations. We could have died on our return to Ostagar or when killing Flemeth. Not to mention that demon infested ruin of a fortress, Warden's Peak. Do I have to go on?“

„No. I get it. Worrying about us dying gets me nowhere. I've risked our lives over and over again because I believed the things we did to be important. This somehow feels different. I've never been so hopeless and depressed and... oh, I don't know.“ She wraps her arms around my neck, pressing closer to me – as close as it's possible with my armour. I have worn it for days without taking it off. I even sleep in it. My muscles are sore and stiff. I feel battered and bruised and while I still looked
forward to returning to the surface a few days ago, it now seems so far away, like a long forgotten dream.

Rori and I, we are Grey Wardens. We have a reason to be here. We submitted ourselves to the taint for a higher cause. The others, they follow us because they believe in this cause. But they aren't obliged like Rori and I are. Guess, we're the last who should complain about being here.

„We've been down here in the darkness for weeks now,“ I point out, nuzzling the top of her head. I instantly regret it. We all do need a bath desperately. Or two baths. Three perhaps. And lots of soap. „Even the Circle of Magi with all it's abominations was cozy compared to this.“

Rori pulls away from me, kicking another stone forcefully into the abyss. „Oh, bloody blast it! Let's give it a try!“

„You're either completely full of sod, gal, or the bravest soul I've ever met,“ Kardol mutters, shaking his head. „Only time will tell. Atrast tunsha, Grey Wardens. May the Ancestors be with you.“

Some darkspawn later – but not half as much as we expected – we enter Bownammar through some kind of backdoor. The archdemon must have driven most of them out of their holes.

„First day, they come and catch everyone. “

I jump at the sound of the voice, slowing down and turning round to see where it comes from. It sounds so hopeless and broken, it chills me to the bone. Rori grabs my hand, squeezing it so tightly that I can even feel it through the gauntlet. „Kitten? What is wrong?“

Rori just shakes her head and whimpers lowly. She looks lost. Haunted. There's something in her eyes, something I've seen there before.

„Second day, they beat us and eat some for meat. “

It's more than just fear. There's a terrified knowing expression in her huge round eyes. They are almost black with only a narrow rim of blue.

„Third day, the men are all gnawed on again. “

„Oh Maker!“ Rori sinks down to her knees, bending over.

„There's corruption and ichor everywhere! You don't really want to sit there?“ Morrigan shudders.

„Aren't you feeling well, my dear?“ Wynne asks worriedly while I hurry to pull Rori back to her feet. For a moment it seems as if she was going to fend me off. She's close to panicking. Her legs don't support her and she's hanging in my arms like a ragdoll.

„What is wrong with her? Is it a dizzy spell? She should drink more water. I told her she needs to drink more.“ Leliana rummages in her backpack for her waterskin and disturbs Schmooples in his sleep. He's the only one that had a quite jolly journey all the way down here.

„Fourth day, we wait and fear for our fate. “

„Fifth day, they return and it's another girl's turn,“ Rori whispers before the voice can recite another line. Tears well up in her eyes.

„Fifth day, they return and it's another girl's turn. “

The voice is like an echo of Rori's words. I stare at her in shock and disbelief „What? How do
you...?“ I gasp.

„Merciful Andraste!“ Wynne exclaims.

„Sixth day, her screams we hear in our dreams;“ Rori breathes, prompting the next sentence.

„Sixth day, her screams we hear in our dreams.“

„Rori?“

Tears are streaming down her cheeks as she begins to shake. A guttural noise escapes her throat, it's raw anguish.

„Seventh day, she grew as in her mouth they spew.“

„What is this? How do you know of it?“ I ask, shaking her when she doesn't react. Her eyes are staring right through me when I make her look at me. I've seen her like this before, the fear, the agony... Oh Maker's Breath!

„Eighth day, we hated as she is violated.“

„The dream,“ Rori sobs, snapping out of her shocked stupor. „I heard it in the dream. The one with the dwarven girl.... what they did to her...“

„What is she talking about?“ Morrigan hisses.

„The nightmare...“ I do recall that dream. How Rori cried, those earsplitting, agonized screams, how she was trapped in the nightmare even after waking. Now I hold her in my arms again when the mere memory of the nightmare has her crumble once more.

„Nightmare? What nightmare? She has nightmares every time she goes to sleep. No wonder, as she shares her tent with you.„ I am too busy comforting Rori to care about the witch's bashing. „You don't make any more sense than she does!“ Morrigan rolls her eyes. „Why do I talk to you at all! I better ask the dog!“

„Ninth day, she grins and devours her kin.“

„There were voices...“ Rori cries as I gently stroke her hair. „Voices in the background... they kept repeating this... over and over and over again...“

„Now she does feast, as she's become the beast.“

„... as the darkspawn... as they... they made her...“

„Now you lay and wait, for their screams will haunt you in your dreams.“

„Made her what? What is the gal stammering about?“ Oghren grunts, growing impatient with Rori.

He hardly ever seems scared of anything at all – my guess: it's the alcohol. If I was as drunk as he is all the time, I'd probably still laugh the archdemon in its face... snout... whatever... while it gnaws on me. On a second thought, if I was as drunk as Oghren I'd have an alcohol poisoning and wouldn't do any laughing at all anymore.

„All I know, if this is a dwarf talking, then she's probably one of Branka's. We have to find her,“ Oghren grumbles, taking a sip from his flask. A rather big sip. How comes he never runs out of that stuff he keeps pouring down his throat?
Anyway, I guess we can agree on that. Although I doubt we will like what we find. I remember that dream. Unlike Rori I woke from that nightmare too early to be prepared for whatever lies ahead. One look at Rori and it's quite obvious she isn't prepared either. She struggles to regain her composure, angrily wiping her tears away.

„If there's still some alive, perhaps we can save them,“ she mutters without much hope. „We at least have to try."

So we follow the voice, repeating the creepy scary poem over and over again, until we find the source in a vast chamber, sickly overgrown with corruption, maimed corpses piled up at the walls and in the middle of the room. It reeks of decay and rotten flesh, the sickenly sweet smell makes us gag. I truly envy Shale this moment.

There's a creature crouching next to a heap of... Maker! I don't even want to take a closer look. The creature itself, it has the voice of a woman. Probably that's what it was before the transformation began. Its... her skin is blotched, dark and tainted like something long dead. Her head in some places is bald in between strands of long brown hair. When she turns, the stare of her hazy, feverish eyes bores into us.

„What is this? A human? Bland and unlikely. Feeding time brings only kin and clan. I am cruel to myself. You are a dream of strangers' faces and open doors."

„Hespith?“ Oghren exclaims. „You've seen better days. What a sodding mess. Hey, Warden gal, ask her where Branka is."

This is someone he knows and he can just stand there and... do nothing? He's either really hard boiled or that booze does effectively numb him. If this was someone I knew... even if I didn't like them... like, if this were Morrigan... and I really cannot stand her... even with that witch I'd show more sympathy than Oghren does right now.

„Oh Maker! What have they done to her?“ Leliana gasps, staying back like the rest of our companions not immune to the taint while Rori and I carefully draw closer.

„Is this the darkspawn corruption? It looks different, doesn't it?“ Rori wonders, her voice choked. She doesn't bother to bite back the tears or disguise her sorrow, the sympathy she feels for this poor lost soul. I feel so numb inside, there seems no room for this horror to unfold. I feel the stinging of unshed tears but I am... too shocked to cry.

„Corruption?“ the dwarven woman answers. „Not us. Not me. Not Laryn. We are not cut. We are fed. Friends and flesh and blood and bile... and... and"

Fed friends? Feeding time brings kin and clan? What in the name of the Maker is she talking about? Is it what I think... no, that's impossible... that's... I must be mistaken. She's talking in riddles, her mind is damaged... But one look at Rori's expression and I know... I know...

Oh merciful Andraste!

„All I could do was wish that Laryn went first. I wished it upon her so I would be spared. But I had to watch. I had to see the change. How can you endure that? How could Branka endure?“

„What... what are they doing? That... the feeding... I... I saw it in my dreams... the darkspawn... they made that girl feed on her own kin... what do they do that for?“ Rori breathes, coming so close to the dwarf, she's almost touching her. I pull her away, trying not to disturb Hespith. As far as I know from what Duncan told me, she's a ghoul... or almost a ghoul. And ghouls, they feed on human flesh
– or on the flesh of their own kind. Anyway, a ghoul is nothing you want to give a sympathy hug. It could bite.

The poor woman is more talking to herself than to us. And she's not making much sense. Branka did something. Something horrible Hespith would not speak of. I am unsure she even realizes we are not just an illusion. It probably doesn't make much of a difference for her. She is lost and there's nothing we could do for her. And then off she runs and we are not any wiser.

„At least it seems Branka is anywhere around here,“ Rori observes.

Okay, maybe a little bit wiser.

„Then what are you waiting for?“ Oghren is the first to follow Hespith. „Come on, before we lose track of her!“

So we chase after her. It's not hard to do. She wants us to follow her. Whatever Branka's crime, Hespith wants us to know. With a bit of luck she'll lead us right to her Paragon.

"Branka became obsessed, that is the word but it is not strong enough. Blessed Stone, there was nothing left in her but the Anvil." Hespith's voice calls from the shadows, a harsh whisper, so sad, so desperate. „The men they kill, they're merciful. But the women, they want. They want to touch, to mold, to change until you are filled with them...“

„That doesn't sound good at all, does it?“ I murmur. I am so completely crept out, I can hardly breathe. Not that breathing is something I'd advise on. Shallow short breaths, just enough not to faint. Best pant with your mouth. Wynne and Leliana keep pressing scented handkerchiefs to their faces. I very much doubt that makes much of a difference. The stench has already soaked into our clothes and hair, its a sticky layer on our skin.

We stand in front of that huge door and I just know whatever is hiding inside, I will never be the same person after seeing it. Rori presses both her palms to the door, her breathing ragged. I can see the throbbing of her pulse at her throat. Her heart is racing with fear. She closes her eyes, inhaling deeply – baaaad idea! She's gagging instantly afterwards.

„Oh, bloody blast it!“ she growls and pushes the door open.

I do not want to think of the details Hespith reveals, I wish I never heard any of that, wish I did not know. I hear it but my mind refuses to accept it.

That girl she speaks of... Laryn... they turned her into... something that spawns darkspawn... into a...

„Broodmother!“ Hespith intones.

„What in the name of the Maker is a...?“ Wynne begins when we turn around the corner... and see.

„Oh Maker!“

You would think we've already seen a whole lot of scary, creepy and gross things. We've come across so many, and so often I thought: this is it! It's downright impossible that there should be a monster more abhorrent, more disgusting, uglier or meaner. But there it is! The worst thing is not that this... thing... is there. The worst thing is that it was forced to become what it is.

It is a huge wobbly mass of stinking corrupted flesh with far too many... breasts... and tentacles, the face swollen beyond recognition.
„I liked your mushroom-theory better,“ Rori mutters next to me.
The broodmother is dead.

I sit down on the corrupted ground. I do so not care. Oghren tries to take a sip from his flask but fails to open it. His hands are shaking so bad he almost drops the bottle. Sten slumps down on my right side. I've never seen him lose his composure – but even he is shaken. Rori is on her knees on my left side, convulsing as she throws up over and over again. I'd comfort her if I could kick myself out of that horrified palsy. Somewhere behind me a woman is crying hysterically. I don't even have the strength to look who it is. Now that the fight and thus the acute life endangering situation are over, we all have far too much time to actually realize what this thing is, how it came to be here – and what that truly means...

Rori wipes her mouth clean when she struggles to sit up. She leans against me and I instinctively wrap my arm around her shoulder and hug her closer.

"How could they not know?" Rori whispers hoarsely. "It's almost a thousand years ever since the First Blight. How could they not know?"

It takes me some time to realize she's talking about the Grey Wardens. "Either Duncan did not tell me the truth when I asked him..." I say, astonished at how alien my own voice sounds. But that would have been a blunt lie then. I don't believe he would have lied to me. He'd have said something like 'You'll find out' but he wouldn't have lied. Or Duncan did not know because nobody told him although they knew. "Or they really did not know. We're down here during a Blight. Usually this place would be crammed with darkspawn. I bet they protect these... things."

I cannot stop thinking about how this once was a dwarven woman. Branka went to the Deep Roads with her whole House in tow. Three hundred dwarves, men and women. How many shared Laryn's fate? And where are they? How many do they spawn and how often? And now, when they are on the surface, when they raid villages... we have to assume they abduct women for that one reason. I don't have to look at her, I know Rori's thinking the very same.

I wish we could have done something for Hespith, although I know she was beyond help. That she committed suicide – in her situation it was the best thing she could do. Isn't it ironic how it probably was the Blight to make this ending possible for her? The darkspawn that was meant to change her into a broodmother got called away by the archdemon – save for the few ones we killed.

Rori is the first one to pull herself together, the first one to stand and straighten. Even Shale is still standing in a corner of the room, being uncharacteristically silent when Rori rises. She takes the flask gently from Oghren's shaking hands, opens it for him and helps him drink as if he was a small child. She gives everybody else but Morrigan a hug of comfort, pets the dog and kisses my cheek. Then she takes care of the witch. Morrigan with her back turned stands away from the group. She's so rigid with her fists clenched at her sides, and still the trembling of her shoulders gives away she's crying. Someone should tell her it's alright to appear human. I do not know what Rori says to her but the result is a rather awkward hug.
"Now let's find Branka," Rori hisses, punching her fist at her palm. Never before have I seen her so furious. I begin to doubt Branka – should she still be alive – will return to Orzammar as a hero – if she returns at all. Rori has a bone to pick with Branka – and it will not be pretty.

We do find the Paragon – and walk right into her trap. If not for the Blight and the dwarven king, Rori would gladly order Leliana, Morrigan and Wynne to shoot that arrogant, self-righteous woman down. Maker! If I believed I could hit her, I'd throw my sword at her.

"You sacrificed your people, all those who believed in you, your lover, for what? An anvil?" Rori gasps in disbelief when Branka explains – if you want to call these platitudes an explanation – what caused her to allow the darkspawn to turn Laryn and all the others into monsters.

"Not just an anvil, silly brat," Branka snorts. She stands there, high above us, looking down on us. That has been her place ever since she started to drive her people through the maze. And afterwards the darkspawn created by what her women had become. "The Anvil! The Anvil of the Void, Caridin's invention that once made the dwarven kingdoms proud."

"Well, it obviously did not fend off the darkspawn then or we wouldn't be standing here," Rori points out. "But I guess, if they had someone like you back then, things never would have turned out as bad as they did."

"Of course not."

"People like you make me sick. You make me sick. The end doesn't justify the means. Not at any cost. What you've done... it's nothing great, it isn't heroism, it's a crime."

"You keep ranting, bitch. I will retrieve the Anvil – and if it's the last thing I will ever do. There's only one way for you, Grey Warden, and it's forward through the maze."

"In case we really have to take this insane bitch back to Orzammar to get some king crowned, I might be tempted to shove her into a lava stream afterwards," Rori hisses when we are forced to enter the maze. To say she doesn't like to be used as a tool by Branka is quite an understatement. She did try to find another way out - with Branka mocking her all the time - but there was none. Even Shale couldn't break the construction down that Branka uses to block the exit. So we don't really have a choice. I can't say that brightens my mood. Or Rori's, She keeps kicking stones as we march into the tunnel.

"What you need is an assassin," Zevran mutters. For once even I am tempted to agree. The elf could come in handy after all. Branka, she's the dwarven version of Loghain – maybe she's even worse. We cannot let her get away with this madness.

"Whatever you do, please don't recruit her, kitten."

"Are you nuts?" Rori exclaims. "That bitch would blow up the whole order with her madness. Avernus' crimes pale in comparison to her."

"I am relieved to hear you say so."

"Alistair," Rori says, sounding so serious I stop to look at her. "Should I ever become like her... should I ever overstep the line, you have to stop me. Promise me."

I lift her hand to my lips for a tender kiss. Yes, we're all dirty and covered in... I don't even want to think about it... but really, it's so bad, it doesn't matter much anymore. "You will never be like her..."

"How can you know? Oghren said Branka was a sweet girl when he married her. And look at her
now! Hespith said she became obsessed with the anvil. That there was nothing else left in her anymore. Her obsession changed her." She lifts her hand to tuck a lose strand behind her ear, her uncertainty causing her to stammer. "You know, I believe in Avernus' researches. I am willing to do a whole lot of things to make this work for the sake of the Grey Wardens. For both our sakes. I could totally become like her. I would have smuggled lyrium and harmed a lot of people that way..."

"That was hardly anything like what Branka did, kitten."

"It was a first step," she insists. This really bothers her. I think, I understand. Branka, she wasn't always like that. She was outstanding. She probably still is. But she pushed it too far. She crossed that very thin line that separates brilliancy from madness. And it's the worst form of madness as it's calculated.

"Rori, as long as you question your own decisions, I very much doubt you will ever turn into a second Branka." I wrap my arm around her shoulder and even manage a small smile for her. "And just in case, you at least don't have to worry about me," I add with a lopsided grin. "I will have Oghren as a drinking buddy. We can sit in the dark corners of dubious taverns together, sip strong spirits – well, I sip, he pours them down - and complain about our crazy wives..."

"Err... Alistair?" Rori giggles. And she bounces. Just a little, but she does.

"Yes?"

"Did you just say.." She doesn't complete her sentence but squeals. Silly little brat.

"Did I just say what?" I really have no clue what she's getting so excited about.

"Oh, nevermind... ". Rori beams so brightly at me, I just have to beam back at her. It's still a mystery to me how she can do that. Only a moment ago we all were torn apart inside by the horrors we were thrown into, touched deep down by the fate of those who died here, and now Rori just wipes this sorrow away with her brilliant smile. She is my beacon of light in this pitch black darkness. All the tragedies and the brushes with death are a reminder of how short life is. Rori is a reminder of how beautiful it can be as long as it lasts.

"Could the two of you please concentrate on that maze filled with deadly traps?" Wynne scolds as she shoos us down the tunnel.

Oh, yes, the deathly danger we are in – again. After what we've just been through, it almost feels like a walk in the park. A very dark, very dangerous park. Still... no darkspawn, no corruption, no spiders, no broodmothers - it's almost cosy. Maybe we should have a picnic?

At the end of the maze we walk into a huge vast cave with rows of golems standing there like a honour guard. Caridin awaits us at the far end of the hall on a platform where that damned anvil stands.

He's a golem, too.

And he has spent all this time standing there and guarding his anvil. Maker! Can there be anything more dull than being a golem? All this standing around, doing nothing at all. No wonder Shale gets strange thoughts of violence. And it doesn't even remember its past. I guess, it at least could cling to precious memories – if a golem can have precious memories at all...

"Ah, there is a voice I recognize," Caridin drones when Shale mutters its surprise to find him here. "Shayle of the House of Cadash."
"You... know my name? Is it you that forged me then? Is it you that gave me my name?" Shale mumbles, confused and also a bit shocked it seems. This has to be an overwhelming moment for it. This golem knows Shale, knows of its forgotten past.

"I made you the golem that you are now, Shayle," Caridin explains. The way he talks to it... it's almost... tender."But before that you were a dwarf. Just as I was. The finest warrior to serve King Galtor and the only woman to volunteer."

"The only... woman? A dwarf?"

"Oh boy! Shale's a girl!" I exclaim, earning myself a scathing scowl by the golem.

Who would have thought? Well, it at least explains why she likes all that pretty shiny crystals so much. Or why she actually asked if they made her look fat. Women do that a lot... They wonder if they are too fat all the time. It is completely beyond me, how all these wonderful and beautiful ladies can have so many issues with their bodies. Leliana, she keeps complaining about her thighs. Morrigan hates her nose. Rori thinks she has a fat ass – her words, not mine. I love her ass. And the whole rest of her... I could just stand there and gawk at her all day, grinning foolishly in my admiration of her beauty...

Wynne clears her throat and nudges me. Huh? I tear my eyes away from Rori's backside and find I missed half of the conversation that has been taking place while I was lost in... uhm... contemplation, I just return to the here and now in time to hear Caridin drone: "If you want the anvil you must hear my story..."

"I was already wondering why he sat here all alone with the anvil for hundreds of years," Rori sighs tiredly. "Okay, what is wrong with it?"

There's nothing wrong with the anvil, but with the people who have the power to use it. Rori and I exchange a look when we hear Caridin talk about those who were forced to become golems. We both know we cannot give Branka the anvil, no matter the cost. She has proven to be ruthless in a totally horrible, crazy, fucked up way.

"I have tried to find a way to destroy the anvil. But no golem can touch it...," Caridin sighs.

Enter Branka. I was already wondering when she would make an appearance. "No, the anvil is mine! No one will take it from me!" she shouts angrily. For such a small person she's quite a huge pain in the ass.

"Shayle, you fought to destroy the anvil once. Do not allow to let it fall into unthinking hands again!" Caridin pleads.

And again we are stuck in the very middle of a conflict and have to make a decision. Well, Rori has to make it. This one wouldn't be a tough one for her - not after Hespith, not after Laryn – if there wasn't the thing with the king. We still have a Blight going on and we do need the dwarves to fight for Ferelden.

"Her hands aren't what you should be worrying about. It's more her head that is seriously damaged," Rori mutters, frowning as she figures her dilemma.

Caridin turns to us desperately, when Shale's confusion becomes obvious to him. "Do not let it enslave more souls than it already has!"

"Okay, listen; you were a Paragon once, right?" Rori says, after a quick moment of consideration.
"Here's the deal: I help you to destroy the anvil if you support a new king. That's the reason why we are here. They cannot decide on their own, you know. Only if they have a king they can help us stop the Blight."

"Don't listen!" Branka cries. "He's been trapped here for a thousand years, stewing in his own madness. Help me claim the anvil and you will have an army like you've never seen!"

"You are one to talk," Rori snorts, arms akimbo. "You only needed two years of stewing down here and your mind is completely soft-boiled. Do you really think I would just forget what you have done to Hespith and the others? They were your people and you murdered them! I don't even want to imagine the army you would forge with that anvil!"

"Branka, you mad bleeding nug-tail! Does this thing really mean so much to you that you can't even see what you lost to get it?" Oghren tries to talk sense into his crazy wife. He makes one step closer, she retreats one step, not allowing him to cross the distance between them.

"Look around! Is this what our empire should look like, a crumbling tunnel filled with darkspawn?! The anvil will let us take back our glory!" Branka howls, clearly frustrated with us as we cannot see her vision.

"Glory? Glory?!" Rori hisses, her eyes blazing with fury, her fists clenched at her sides, she's trembling with the effort of not just lunging herself at Branka and scratching her eyes out. "You did this all for glory? You... you..."

",... bloody blasted thrice-cursed whorespawn!" Wynne prompts forcefully when in her anger Rori lacks the vocabulary for a proper insult. "You shoddy piece of crap! You blasted flaming rat turds! You..."

"Errr... alright, Wynne, I think, she got it," I chuckle. The old frail lady can curse like a sailor. Even Oghren is impressed.

"So it fights with Caridin?" Shale inquires. She's so lost. I can't blame her. This has to be quite a shock for her. A woman. A dwarf. Shayle of the House of Cadash. She has a lot to digest there.

"Bloody yes, it does!" Rori snarls.

"Good. That seems right."

"Blast, yes it does!" I growl, my hand already resting at the hilt of my sword.

"Thank you, stranger. Your compassion shames me." Caridin is utterly relieved we didn't give in to the temptation.

"No! You will not take it! Not while I still live!" Branka cries, her eyes flaring with mad determination.

"Branka, don't throw your life away for this!" Oghren begs the Paragon smith that he is married to. He really must have loved her. He still loves her or he wouldn't try to save her as he does. It's the first time the real Oghren emerges from the vapour of the spirits he keeps downing in. I begin to believe, that's the reason why she left him back in Orzammar when she took the rest of her house with her. Perhaps Oghren could have stopped her. And she knew it. Or I am just making this up. I am a hopeless romantic. Maker! Oghren can even now forget about the crimes Branka committed, offering her a future when he has to realize there is none. If this is not love, then I don't know anything about it...
Rori's eyes meet mine, her expression is full of sympathy for the drunken dwarf. She closes her eyes, inhaling deeply as she tries to calm down. "Branka, we have to destroy the anvil" she presses through gritted teeth, trying to reason with her when all she wants to do is make her pay for Hespith, for Laryn, for all the others.

"Just give her the blasted thing," Oghren begs Rori. "She's confused. Maybe once she calms down we can talk to her."

"I can't." Rori whispers, touched by the dwarf's plea. "I am so sorry, Oghren... but I cannot give her the anvil. She allowed the darkspawn to turn the women of her house into broodmothers! And what for? Glory. That's not confusion. That's madness. The anvil in her hands would be a terrible tool of destruction."

Branka won't accept this, though. She is really willing to fight us, fight her own husband to get the anvil. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. With all the crime she has already committed, this is nothing that gets me upset. For a moment it seems Oghren could falter, but he pulls himself together and helps us slay his wife and the golems she controls. I cannot even imagine how hard this has to be for him. No wonder he drinks so much.

When it's over, he kneels there on the ground next to his dead wife. "You sodding crazy nug-tail," he mutters, gently closing her dead eyes that stare at him accusingly. "Why couldn't you listen? Such a sodding waste." He does have a whole lot of practice to pull himself together. Or it's the content of that flask he downs. "Stupid woman. I always knew the anvil would kill her. Err...I suppose, you couldn't bring Branka back? Make her a golem like you?"

"I wouldn't do such a thing to her, even if I could," Caridin drones with sympathy, destroying Oghren's last hope to save his wife. What he can do for us, is forge a crown to give to the new king. I do hope that will do. That was a whole lot of trouble for a pretty piece of metal.

We stand around, doing nothing but waiting for the crown – Maker! I cannot even remember when I last stood anywhere doing nothing at all, not even watching out for someone sneaking upon me to kill. I cannot even feel darkspawn anywhere close by. There's an emptiness in my mind and silence. For the first time in weeks there's nothing but silence. Sure, there's Caridin hammering around on the anvil, but that's a noise outside my head. I can handle that. But inside... inside my mind... the whispering has stopped for now. Only now do I realize how exhausted and tired I really am. I am emotionally drained, close to collapsing both physically and mentally. We all are.

I guess for the moment I can call myself lucky to still be alive. Even luckier as the woman I love is here with me and I can hold her warm, soft body in my arms, feel her breath on my skin and the throbbing of her pulse against my lips.

All Oghren has left is a cold dead body.

He is kneeling next to Branka, muttering to himself. Knowing Oghren he's probably telling her how stupid she was. It hurts to see him like that. Sure, he drives me crazy. He has hideous habits, he is a leering lecher and constantly drunk – but I wished fate would have shown him some mercy.

I don't think she deserves it. Rori doesn't think so either, still we help Oghren paying his last respect to Branka. We're doing it for him, not for her.
“Alistair, my dear friend, did you really have to destroy that anvil?” Zevran remarks, sounding regretful.

“We promised to do it,” I point out. I don't feel much like chatting with the lecherous elf right now. Not after Hespith, Laryn, Branka and Caridin. It weighs me down, just like everything in the blasted Deep Roads. We have returned to the camp of the Legion of the Dead. Kardol was obviously surprised to see us again, even more so after he heard our story. “It ensures nobody gets ever turned into a golem again.”

“Rori promised to do it,” the elf corrects me. “You didn't promise anything. But of course you had to act as a gentleman when she couldn't even lift that hammer.” I try to suppress a grin at the memory of Rori – a quite petite woman – trying to lift the hammer – a quite huge and heavy tool. I fail. It was just too cute how she pulled at it with all her strength, her face all red from her struggle, and it didn't even move an inch. “At least we got to see you work the hammer,” Zevran muses as he rakes his eyes over me. “And the hammer went up and down, and his muscles worked under his sweaty skin,” he purrs, the rosy tip of his tongue darting out of his mouth as he licks his lips slowly.

Huh?

“You didn't get to see any of my muscles or skin,” I mutter, inching away from the elf.

“Oh, I do have a vivacious imagination, my friend.”

“We should have taken the anvil,” Morrigan agrees. She has been blissfully silent ever since fighting the broodmother. See, I am an incurable optimist. I can even find something positive in encountering a broodmother. “An army of obedient golems would have been much to our advantage when fighting the archdemon.”

“I don't see much of a difference between the use of the Anvil of the Void and Flemeth's ritual to possess her daughter's body,” Rori comments and – Whoa! Someone please pinch me! - Morrigan blushes and – I so can't believe this is happening – looks ashamed. She casts her eyes down and stares at the indefinable stew in her bowl. Unbelievable! Displaying two human emotions in one day! Wynne should check on the witch. She has to be ill.

“Oh, I wouldn't have minded to become a golem... then I would always be as hard as a rock,” Zevran chuckles, winking at the ladies, sitting together at one side of the campfire. Although nobody wants to stay any longer in the Deep Roads as absolutely necessary, we do need a rest and the Legion provides food, a safe place to catch some sleep – and best of all: fresh water! I feel much better now that I have scrubbed Laryn off my skin. Too bad none of the dwarves had a razor. Every single one of the small men I asked just stared at me as if I was completely nuts.

“You're already as dumb as a box of rocks,” Morrigan comments, returning to act like the mean bitch she is. Good! I've already been worried! “And that is hard enough to endure.”

“Aw, you are such a cruel woman, dear Morrigan. So much beauty combined with so much malice. It is most intriguing.” The elf is truly an optimist or he's suicidal. I can't decide.

“Can't you just crush his head?” Morrigan asks Shale. The golem has been rather silent ever since Caridin told her who she was. Even more though since she had to watch him kill himself. “And Alistair's when you're already at it.”
“Hey! What did I do now?” I sulk.

“You exist,” Morrigan snaps.

Charming as always. She's working hard on making up for those two moments when I actually could have liked her.

“Zevran, you have noticed that no golem has their proper parts left after the transformation, haven't you?” Leliana asks sweetly. She's painting her toe-nails bright red. I really don’t understand why. She says a girl wants to have pretty feet. Then she paints Schmooples's toenails, too. Well, if it makes her feel better. After all the deaths we’ve witnessed, I guess everybody deserves their bit of comfort.

“Ahhh, I knew there was a catch!”

“You already make things rock just the way you are, Zev,” Rori laughs as she sits down in front of me, handing me her brush. Ahh, and there is my bit of comfort. I love brushing her hair. It's still damp, scented with the freshness of verbena. Oh, how I missed that scent. I had almost forgotten how it smelled. I love to run my fingers through her soft hair, love to nuzzle the top of her head and inhale that scent. Closing my eyes, I almost manage to imagine we are not in the Deep Roads.

I know, Rori and I still have an unpleasant task ahead before we can rest. We have to enter the nest of the broodmother once more to show Kardol and his officers the horrible truth. They cannot believe unless they see it with their very own eyes. I cannot blame them. It's too terrible to imagine. But they have to know. They have to realize the danger the women are in and the danger they can become should they be caught by the darkspawn. It is Leliana to offer a solution that could work:

“Bards with the most delicate missions carry a small vial with them filled with deadly poison. In order to protect their secrets they would commit suicide when caught rather than giving away what they know.”

It sounds like madness... but compared to the transformation it's a salvation.

“Do you think that's what happens to the female Grey Wardens that go to the Deep Roads when they hear their Calling?” Rori wonders when our short time of rest is over and we lead Kardol and his men and women deeper into the now darkspawn-less Dead Trenches. He obviously doesn't care about orders now. Not after what he has learnt. “Wouldn't that be ironic? Their whole life long they fight the darkspawn only to be turned into something that probably spawns more than they could have killed in five lifetimes.”

“Rori, you really shouldn't think about that.” I don't want to think about that. I cannot endure thinking about that. And I wish she wouldn't insist talking about it.

“Shouldn't I? It could be possible, couldn't it? It scares me right out of my mind.” She shudders as if freezing in a place so hot with all the lava flowing around that I feel like getting slowly boiled in my armor.

“You cannot know this would happen” I try to soothe both her and me – without much success. I hate Leliana's idea, I hate the mere thought of Rori carrying a vial of deadly poison with her, I hate that she could be forced to drink it.

Rori nervously chews at her bottom lip while we watch from a distance how Kardol and his officers examine the broodmother's body. She looks as if she's going to be sick again. “I do not want to take the risk. If I live long enough to hear my Calling, nobody can make me go down here to die – if I died. Dying sounds like fun compared to what happened to Laryn.” She leans against me, pressing
her face to the crook of my neck. “Let's get out of here. They'll find their way back without us.”

Out of here doesn't mean straight out of the Deep Roads, though. It means Cadash Thaig as Rori says she couldn't find the strength in her to return to the Deep Roads once she has left them. Agreed, although I don't really get why we have to risk our lives for the lost memories of a golem. Don't get me wrong, I have begun to somewhat like the walking-talking statue. She still creeps me out but listening to her when she bashes Morrigan — HA!

Anyway, the day comes when we return to the gates of Orzammar, all dirty, exhausted and traumatized but at least we're still alive - somewhat. I stumble through the city streets, feeling more dead than alive, deafened by the noise of thousands of voices, overwhelmed by the mass of people and the brightness of the light — and hey, this is an underground city! I am completely lost, holding on to Rori’s hand, although she's as confused and stunned as I am.

Luckily the Grey Warden estate is not far away or we'd have gotten totally lost. Luckily the house has several bathrooms as we all run for them as soon as we fall through the door. (Well, not Oghren, his first destination is the larder and the beer barrels there.) Luckily dwarves are masterminds when it comes to practical inventions so they used the lava to heat their water and one just has to open the faucets for either hot or cold water and the tub, actually a stone basin embedded into the floor, fills itself. Awesome. I can't resist playing with the faucets, turning them on and off - until Rori joins me and I find it's far more exciting to play with her instead.

So within no time at all after our return to Orzammar, I find myself excruciatingly tortured. I sit in almost scorching water with a naked ginger straddling me, her core pressed to my throbbing manhood and I cannot dare to move as she is sliding a razor blade across my throat.

Yes, I was totally looking forward to shave that fuzzy beard off. Honestly, I look as if I had a dirty, strawberry blonde ferret clinging to my face. At least the whole hairy mess stinks like a ferret. You get the impression. And I certainly do love Rori shaving me... but... oh Maker!... this is going to push me to the limits of my selfcontrol and willpower...

"Are you trying to kill me?" I groan, trying to keep as still as possible while Rori is sliding around on my lap, rubbing herself against me. It's damn hard. Uhm... not that... okay, that too!... very, very, very hard... but what I actually mean... oh Maker!... keeping still is... -gasp! -...hard!... Maker's Breath!

My breathing is ragged, I swallow hard when I try to clam down, causing my Adam's apple to bop at my throat just when Rori runs the blade across it.

"Hush, keep still," she whispers close to my ear, pulling at my hair to make me tilt my head back, then carefully and oh so slowly running the razor up my chin. Her fingers still entangled with my hair, she leans closer, pressing her bosom against my chest.

Oh merciful Andraste! I swear she does that on purpose.

I can feel the hardness of her nipples, scraping across my chest, and the stark contrast of the softness of her mounds, It's driving me crazy. She is driving me crazy.

I clutch the sides of the stone basin to keep my hands from trembling - and to keep myself from grabbing her hips and slam her down on my painfully erect manhood.

"Ro-ro-rori, oh Maker... don't... oh... yessss!" I moan when she begins to rock her hips, her slick core slipping across my member. How she manages such a steady hand is totally beyond me. Her grin is so smug. She looks like a cat that got the cream, so pleased with herself.
I didn't get to make love to her for weeks, if she goes on like that she'll have me cum simply by teasing me as she does. And she knows. She even has the nerve to hum when she shaves the small patch above my upper lip. All the time she sways her hips in an excruciatingly slow rhythm, massaging my manhood with her soft folds.

Maker's Breath! I want to fuck her. Now.

"Put it down," I growl, reaching out to take the razor from her. Carefully, because the thing is sharper than sharp and she's working my face with it. Just Rori won't put it down.

"Behave yourself, prince. I am not yet done with you," Rori scolds me, her voice husky, her beautiful eyes hazy. She isn't as unimpressed by her actions as she wants me to believe.

"Could you please hurry?" I beg with a bit of whining just for the effect. Rori is merciless, though. She just snickers and kisses the tip of my nose before continuing to give me a rather close shave.

"So impatient, your Highness?" she teases, rocking her hips forcefully against mine. I almost jump right out of the tub. All I can do, is clutch the rim of the tub harder, until my knuckles turn white, to stop myself from bucking my hips in reply as she moves the razor across my skin.

"Your Hardness would be more appropriate," I gasp, scowling at her when she giggles. Little beast!

The moment she puts the razor down, I'm upon her. I don't even wait for her to wipe the rest of the foam off my face, tossing the towel away when she reaches for it. Her protest is muffled by my lips claiming hers for a deep, searing kiss. I revel in her sweet velvet taste, our tongues intertwined for a sensual dance.

In Zevran's stories women's kisses taste of strawberries or cherries or wine. Rori's taste of sage. Her lips are so soft against mine, like the petals of a rose. I have kissed her a thousand times or more and still I am astonished at how her simple kiss can make my heart beat faster, how it can send a warmth that feels like the essence of happiness spreading through my entire body, how it can sent shivers down my spine that spread into my loins and have me tingle with excitement.

All the time she's been teasing me, I felt like I could not endure it any longer. Now I hold her in my arms, slide my hands along her sinuous body, feel her and taste her, she's the one to urge me on, impaling herself on me.

Oh Maker!

I have to grab her hips to slow her down and stop her from shoving me over the edge.

I've been thinking about making love to her again all our way back to Orzammar, fantasizing about how I'd slowly drive us both over the edge, how I'd worship her body... It worked perfectly as a distraction from... well, you know... all those things that happened. Anyway, I had it all planned out. And I am planning to stick to my plan...

"So impatient, dear lady?" I rasp, sounding all sexy and husky. Whoa! I'm so hot, she has to watch out to not get burned... Too much? Yeah, probably.

"Alistair!" she protests, trying to buck against me as I wrap one arm around her waist to keep her still. At the same time I seek access to her breasts which means she has to bend backwards... "Ow, hey! Are you trying to break my back?"

"Sorry, kitten," I mumble, grinning sheepishly. I rise from the water, taking Rori with me. I sit her down at the edge of the basin with me between her legs.
This is much better. I have full access to her breasts as she's sprawled across the floor, her back arched. And I control the pace of our lovemaking, sliding in and out of her in an oh so very slow rhythm, lazily stroking the velvet tightness of her inner walls. With the same laziness I circle my thumb around that tiny pebble between her legs, eliciting those cute mewing noises from her. Oh, how I missed that sound.

She's my goddess, I'm her disciple - and I am going to worship her now... This is so much better than divine service at the Chantry... maybe Zevran is right, more orgies definitely would be an improvement... oh, whoa! Where did that thought come from? I am so in for eternal, everlasting, endless perdition.

Rori giggles as she watches me, her beautiful, dark eyes half closed and hazy with lust.

Maker! I love how she clenches around me when she laughs while I am inside her.

"What's so funny?" I mumble breathlessly against her skin, nuzzling her neck. She sighs contently, squirming when I continue my ministration, trailing soft bites and wet kisses past her collarbone to the soft mounds of her breasts.

"You are... Oh Maker!... Thinking. Dirty. Thoughts. Aren't. You? ... Merciful Andraste! Alistair!"

She really shouldn't attempt to start a conversation when I am sucking roughly at her nipples. At the same time I keep thrusting into her in slow-motion. All the way out, all the way back in. Oh, how she squirms.

"How do you know?" I mutter, causing her to hiss as I stop my assault for as long as it takes me to say these four words. She's unable to answer as I return to thoroughly worship her heavenly body. All she manages is to breathe my name repeatedly and moan. It's like a symphony she composes only for me.

I push her closer and closer to the edge, her breathing is ragged, her body tenses. She's strung like a bow, her pleasure so tightly knotted it's almost painful. She's going to burst into a mindnumbing climax once she reaches her peak.

As much as I'd love to continue this sensual torment, I can't endure it anymore. The unbearable pressure in my testicles, the tantalizing throbbing of my manhood... It's high time for a crescendo... I pull out of her once more, all the way out, all the way back in. Oh, how she squirms.

I don't give her any time to adjust to the new rhythm. I grab her hips, slamming into her over and over again after I've kept her close but never let her slip for such a long time. She cums so violently that her whole body spasms, She's practically lifted off the floor by the force of her orgasm and she clings to me, digging her nails into my shoulders. She can hardly gasp for air before the second thunderous wave of pleasure crashes against her.

I am dragged along. She's so tightly clenched around me, she's practically squeezing me, milking my seed out of me. It's pure, blissful, mindnumbing. It's fortissimo. I see stars dancing in front of my eyes. Never before have I been so aware of my body. At the same time I feel like floating. I collapse on top of her, panting heavily, when Rori comes undone with a third mindshattering climax.

Trembling she lies in my arms. My body feels too heavy to move. There's a tingling sizziling through me from head to toe. My head is absolutely empty as if I just effectively blew up my mind. That's what the sisters at the Chantry always said would happen when one had unreproductive sex... Boy,
they were right about that after all!

With my face pressed against Rori's breasts I just stupidly mumble incoherent nonsense. I even drool a little, my ginger is in no better condition. We're both so spent that all I manage after what seems an eternity is to drag myself out of the basin. Then we curl up in each others arms and fall asleep right there on the stone floor...

"So, how did you know I was having dirty thoughts?" I mutter sleepily, my eyes still closed, when I feel Rori stir and stretch next to me. I have no idea how much time has passed while we slept. Those dwarves are amazing. They have a system that heats the whole floor. I could lie on these stones forever, the warmth against my back is pure bliss for my sore muscles.

"Your ears were practically glowing red," Rori murmurs dreamily. "They always turn pink when you have dirty thoughts. It's so incredibly cute."

"I'm not cute, woman."

"Sure. You keep telling yourself that."
The Vast Sky

The starlit sky stretches high above us. I have never seen anything as beautiful and magnificent before as this silken black, sparkling canopy. I'm in awe at how big and vast the world suddenly is, and only now, when I can breathe freely again, do I realize the suffocating effect the underground realm had on me. It felt like... being buried alive.

We were invited to stay after Rori presented Caridin's crown to the new king, but as it turned out rather unpleasant and bloody, we decided we would much rather leave for the surface. Orzammar's army and the Legion of the Dead will join our fight against the archdemon, the new king and the House of Learning have been informed of the broodmothers... there's nothing left to do for us in the dwarven city.

We're not exactly King Bhelen's best friends anyway, not after we first worked for Harrowmont, switched to work for him and then probably changed our minds a few more times... I got lost somewhere in between but Leliana claims she always knew what we were doing. Anyway, Bhelen isn't too fond of us, but I guess that's alright because the feeling is mutual.

Next to me, Rori inhales the cold winter air deeply, her face raised towards the sky. Her eyes sparkle as beautifully as the stars and she smiles in awe, overwhelmed by the beauteousness of this frosty winter night. Then she laughs, a clear ringing and joyous sound bubbling out of her mouth. Picking up a handful of snow, she pirouettes and throws the flakes into the air so that they come falling down on her, glittering silverish in the cool moonlight. Next she pounces me, pressing a quick kiss to my lips, before she drags me along down the snowcovered stairs that lead to the makeshift town outside the gates of Orzammar. She dances me around, we run and laugh, Barkley following at our heels, barking happily. Rori squeals in delight, enraptured by this magic wonderland... until people start opening their windows and shout at us to shut the fuck up! Some even empty their chamberpot onto the street - and only miss us by inches.

Suddenly the surface air isn't that fresh anymore and Shale finds herself threatened by another danger from above. Leliana tries to soothe the golem's worries and stop her from breaking down doors to crush some heads all the way to the inn where we left the horses.

"You know, Shale, we could get you an umbrella," the bard suggests helpfully. "Actually that has been a quite common fashion in Val Royeaux for some time. They come in different shapes and colours with ribbons or pearls or embroidery... for your purpose I'd suggest something simple - but still fashionable."

"That sounds like... a good idea." Shale carefully sidesteps a brown and yellow puddle in the snow. "But...then I would still be walking through the mess produced by those squishy flesh-creatures." Pause. "The sister has interesting footwear."

"Oh? You... like shoes, do you?" Leliana first beams broadly at the golem, then down at her high-heeled dark purple hunting boots. I very much doubt they are made for hunting. Unless of course you want to stab the prey with the heel. That could work.

Here's a piece of advice: Never, I mean it, never talk to Leliana about shoes unless you a) have problems falling asleep or b) have an insatiable proclivity for shoes. You will learn that shoes aren't simply shoes and a whole lot more rather unimportant things you never wanted to know. Leliana is really cute. Sometimes. Other times she's also quite scary. Anyway, I can call myself lucky that Rori thinks that boots are made for walking.
"It would protect my feet from having to wade through the excrement," Shale ponders. "Also my mass is considerable. Walking as silently as the sister does, it's impossible for me. Some cushioning on my feet would be ideal, but I doubt such footwear could be made."

"Hmm." Leliana rubs her nose while she has a closer look at Shale's feet. "I could see some nice, thick sandals being made. With very tick leather straps. What do you think, Rori-sweetheart?"

"We still got some drakeskin left," Rori suggests. "It's very robust."

"Oh yes, that could be done!" Leliana giddily claps her hands. "Perhaps we could find some cobbler who could give it a try!"

"What about Wade?" Rori says enthusiastically. "He's a smith but he sure would love to work with drakeskin. He made my boots. Why not make sandals for a golem?"

"Herren is going to kill you," I mutter. Whilst Herren welcomed us as potential customers the first time we stumbled into the store, he was less than pleased when we appeared there again. And again. And again. Wade, he loves us. He claims Rori and Leliana are the only ones to see he has the manifold soul of an artist. "He'll get a ballista installed at the roof of the store just for you. He'll have a trap door hidden at the entrance, you step on it and... CLAP!... you fall down into an iron spiked pitch..."

"You have a rather violent imagination," Rori laughs.

"Yeah, you keep laughing as long as you still got a chance. I'm just being realistic. But go ahead, just walk into Wade's Emporium again with another of your individual orders and see what happens."

"What colour would you want?" Leliana doesn't feel discouraged by the mentioning of Herren and his annihilating, everlasting wrath.

"Surely the colour is unimportant," Shale snorts. One would think so, right? I did think so, too. Until I learnt that a warm brown with a reddish touch, chestnut, not cherry, goes well with my strawberry blonde hair. Maker, I didn't even know there was something as strawberry blonde until Leliana pointed it out to me.

"In fact, the colour is very important," Leliana corrects the golem. "That, and picking a shape that makes your ankles look slender... and you could use some help there, I fear."

"I... have thick ankles?" Shale sounds shocked. She lifts one huge, thick foot off the ground, and insecurely examines her ankles.

Leliana quickly pets her arm. "It's all right. I don't like my thighs. What's important is working with what you have. Look at Rori. She has a rather curvy body, her hourglass figure calls for a different kind of dress than Morrigan's slim frame. Well, you get the idea."

"Hmm. Very well." Shale thinks about her options for a while. "I wish my shoes to be red."

"Ooh! Bold choice! We'll have to remember that! You should have your umbrella in the same colour. You are going to look gorgeous!"

While Shale discusses the benefits of footwear with the bard, Oghren is having a difficult time getting adjusted to his new surroundings. He's ducking his head, clinging to his flask as if his life depended on it. It's his first time ever on the surface. Whilst for the rest of us it's like being set free after years of imprisonment in a pitch black dungeon, for Oghren it has to be quite a shock. He's utterly relieved when we're finally inside the inn.
Rori and I have no intention to stay inside. Not when the night is still young, not when we've been trapped underground for over a month. I get the mulled wine and the cheese, she fetches the furs and blankets. There's a hayloft above the stables with a huge opening that allows us to watch the sky. It's freezing cold but cuddled against each other and wrapped in thick furs it's still much better than being locked inside again. Give us a few days on the road with the icy wind whipping at us mercilessly and the frost biting our skin, and a few nights in our tents, sleeping on the frozen ground, and a few mornings breaking the thick ice of a creek to get to the cold, cold water or just rubbing clean with the snow - and we'll very, very quickly change our minds.

For now it's just a perfectly beautiful moment. The pale light of the moon kisses the snow covered mountain tops and the stars are like diamond droplets on a canopy of black velvet. Sounds kitschy? I'm in a kitschy mood, you know. I feel a bit aloof, dizzy, like floating around in my own little bubble. It could be the thin air that high up in the mountains. It could be Rori's fault, around her I have trouble thinking straight. All I can do is grin foolishly and pinch myself to make sure this isn't a dream. Yes, I do know what Morrigan would say! I'm telling you, I'm not stupid... Not all the time.

I hold my woman in my arms as I watch that beautiful night sky. Her soft curls tickle the side of my face, her kisses taste of sweet mulled wine and her skin is hot and smooth against mine when I lay her down in the hay to make love to her. Her moans and gasps form small white clouds when leaving her mouth, mingling with my hot breath made visible in the cold of the night.

It's all sweet and tender and cuddly canoodling at its best. Both of us seek as much body contact as possible. It's just too cold for experimental scrambling about. Rori and I together, it's as breathtakingly beautiful as this night.

"Do you think you made the right choice?" I ask her when she lies in my arms, nuzzling my neck and smiling against my skin. It has begun to snow, soft white flakes float slowly to the ground.

"Only time will tell," Rori sighs, thoughtfully drawing patterns on my chest with her index finger. She doesn't even notice she's doing it. "It was not an easy decision. None of the candidates was perfect. Harrowmont, he was like an old grandpa. If I had believed him to be capable of ruling a nation, he'd have been my choice. But he seemed too weak. Too indecisive. He'd have hidden behind traditions. I wish, I could have saved him, though. I didn't want him to die."

"It wasn't your fault, kitten. There was nothing you could have done about that. Bhelen had secured it that Harrowmont and his followers wouldn't reach for the throne once more. It could have been the only way to prevent a civil war." Now thinking about that... Should I be worried? I should, shouldn't I? Oh, blast it!

"Yes, Bhelen... well, Bhelen is an asshole," Rori puts it in a nutshell. "But he has the strength to do something... I'm not sure if he will do the right things. But he for sure will do something. He can turn out to become a great reformist... or a horrible tyrant. Just like with Branka, this is only a thin line. I do hope he will not cross it. For now I do believe, King Bhelen to be the better choice when it comes to fighting the archdemon and the darkspawn in general. He will also be more open to any trade or alliances with Ferelden... which will be good for the future king."

"Or queen. Don't forget about Anora."

Rori snorts in reply.

"I take it you can't stand her," I laugh. I don't know Anora personally. The people loved her and Cailan. I can't believe this has changed much. Loghain, he's not the biggest problem for Eamon when he really plans to make me king. Anora has proven to be a good queen. I feel a bit like stealing from her, like taking what does rightfully belong to her and not to me. What do I know about being
"Mama got along quite well with her," Rori mutters compunctiously. "I always thought her to be... quite a bitch. Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I'm just mean. She scared me, just like her father." She lies back, staring at the dark ceiling as she pouts defiantly, just like a little girl. "She was always oh so very nice and oh so very polite when we met... but... next to her I always felt like a complete failure. She's so... perfect. Ladylike, aloof, cold. She'd never show up for dinner with mud covered boots and leaves entangled in her hair." Sighing she pulls a stray of hay from her curls. "Or hay."

"That doesn't make her a bad leader, Rori."

"I know!" she wails. "Let us not talk about her now, okay?"

The freezing cold wakes me. My beloved fellow Warden has stolen all the furs and blankets and wrapped herself up in them, leaving me shivering in the cold of the night. Only the top of her head is visible, a mess of tousled red curls. If I didn't love her so much... and if she wasn't as incredibly cute as she is... and if I wasn't too well behaved anyway... and if all this gentleman upbringing didn't forbid it... I'd so dump her in the snow. Instead I coax my way back under the furs, snuggling to her to get warm again.

The sky is slowly turning grey. It's close to dawn, the coldest part of the night. I cannot go back to sleep anymore - and I have no intention to do so anyway. Instead I decide to do something suicidal: I wake Rori. She is so not a morning person. I don't even have coffee to appease her with.

"Hmph... wh-what?" she murmurs sleepily when I start nibbling at her earlobe.

"Wake up, kitten," I purr into her ear.

She groans in reply - but it's not the lustful type of groan, more the unnerved, exasperated type. "Sex really can wait until later, Alistair," Rori grunts and tries to pull the blanket over her head to escape from my caress.

Charming.

"I do not want sex!" I sulk.

Rori snorts.

"Well, I do want sex," I admit sullenly. "But not right now." Sighing I keep poking and nudging her until she hisses at me like a cat and I have to catch her wrists to stop her from drumming her small fists against my chest. "Hey! Stop baring your teeth at me, kitten!"

"You better have a good excuse for waking me before dawn," she growls, trying hard to be mad at me when I present her my best disarming boyish grin.

"I do." I coax my ginger to sit up, wrapping her in my arms with the furs around us. "The sunrise."

The sky is softly glowing, a golden hue touches the snow covered mountain tops, kissed by the first rays of sunlight. Dark purple clouds float across the sky, surrounded by a warm pink and orange halo. Dark shadows are cast away by light as the sun peeks over the side of the mountains.

"Oh..." Rori gasps, overwhelmed by the beauty of this winter dawn. It's even more beautiful as she is here with me. She smiles happily at me with sparkling eyes. "Fine, I forgive you for waking me and I'm sorry for having snapped at you."
"And for stealing the blankets?"

"For that, too." She softly kisses my lips.

"That's all?" I pout, attempting to appear all hurt and neglected. "What about the make up sex?"

Rori laughs, pulling me close for a sweet, longlasting kiss. "I knew it!" she murmurs against my lips. "Alright, lets get inside and see what can be done about that."

Now, that sounds far better to me...

Two days later the snow and the cold and the winter nights aren't that romantic anymore. But I shouldn't complain. Poor Oghren is tied to the back of Zevran's horse and clings to the saddle knob desperately. Next to being on horseback, he's also blindfolded. His eyes are covered by a dark scarf. He has spent his whole life underground and is not used to the sunlight. Within a few hours he was snow blind. He can call himself lucky that Wynne took good care of him as soon as she noticed he was having trouble. She says his eyes will fully recover.

"So... Antiva. Wonderful place. Full of... Antivans," Oghren attempts to make some conversation while he is completely at the elf's mercy.

"Oghren." the elf replies pleasantly in his thick accent. "If you want to bed me, you have but only to ask."

The dwarf almost jumps out of the saddle. Maker, I almost fall of my horse. So does Rori. "What!? Draw your weapon and say that again!" Oghren nervously fumbles around for his axe. Blindfolded and helpless as he is with the elf practically pressed to his back, I can't blame him for panicking. Oghren breaks out in a sweat when he realizes the... unfortunate... uhm... position he's in.

Zevran bursts into laughter until tears sting in his eyes. "I jest, my foul-smelling friend. You are only slightly more attractive to me than a slime-filled pool of swamp water."

"Better be," Oghren grunts, relaxing slightly.

"You have my oath," the elf chuckles. "You of course can't see it, my stocky little friend, but the view is quite magnificent." He beams at Rori, winks at me, rakes his eyes over Morrigan and then lets them drift towards Leliana. "You, unfortunately, are none of the attractions."

"Bloody Antivans. Why can't I ride with Morrigan instead?"

"Because Morrigan would feed your still beating heart to the dog," the witch snaps. Barkley whines and chokes, shuddering at the mere thought.

"HA! You couldn't hurt me if you wanted to, witch, you know that?" the dwarf laughs in her direction.

"T'is so?"

"Dwarves resist magic, woman. There's nothing you could do." Oghren's pretty optimistic if you ask for my opinion. I wouldn't make the mistake to think magic is the only way Morrigan can use for her defense. She's mean, she's evil and she had us kill her own mother - who probably was even meaner and more evil. Go figure.

"Nothing?" Morrigan asks sweetly. It's always dangerous when her voice gets so soft. It creeps me out, makes shivers run down my spine - the unpleasant type of shivers, those you get when entering
a haunted house or meeting a giant spider face to face. "I could not, for instance, kick you in your
manhood?"

"Oof." Oghren instinctly clutches said parts - and almost falls off the horse.

"Do you wish to see?"

"Not necessary" the dwarf grunts. "I'll stay with the elf."

"Well, the offer stands." Very pleased with herself, the witch smiles wickedly at the dwarf. He can
call himself lucky that he can't see or he'd be running for the hills - or back to the Deep Roads.

When we arrive at Kinloch Hold - again - Carroll and Cullen welcome a group of templars, the
reinforcements after most templars died during Uldred's rebellion.

"Ooh, that's huge," Oghren remarks at the sight of the tower. His eyes have indeed fully recovered
and ever since he's been leering at any woman that we came across. "Hehe, I wonder how long it
took to erect it." He nudges my side, giggling again. "Get it? Erect?"

"Huh? I don't know how long it took to build the tower. Maybe you can ask Irving....," I begin.

"Son, how did you ever find your way between the boss's legs without a map?" Oghren grunts.

"You know, Zevran has asked me the same," I mutter, blushing, when the dwarf keeps shaking his
head at me.

"Don't say no more, she showed you, right? Good of her." He gives Rori the thumbs up. I decide it's
best to act as if I didn't hear him talking at all.

"Do you ever wonder why the mages built their tower at Lake Calenhad? Do they have an aversion
to practicality or something?" I ask both templars as they wait for their brothers in arms to climb onto
the ferry. Carroll eyes Rori suspiciously, Cullen for the first time greets us with a smile.

"For the templars it's not that bad," Cullen grins. "We do have the lowest rate of run-away mages.
Few are mad enough to swim through the lake. There's always some who try and if they are lucky
we can fish them out before they drown. I think Anders is the only one who really made it to the
shore."

"The rowing sucks," Carroll sulks and his expression even darkens when we ask for a passage.

"Oh, come on, Carroll, a strong templar like you." Rori smiles but she's not at her best. Carroll hasn't
yet forgotten about his run in with her at my birthday - and she hasn't either.

"Y'know, I'm feeling a little peckish," Carroll complains. "Not like I could row another group across
that lake." He pointedly stares at Sten who has pulled a huge tin filled to the rim with chocolate chip
cookies from his backpack. The Qunari has just picked one when he notices everybody is looking at
him.

"Vashedan! Here! Munch on these if you like," the Qunari sighs, utterly frustrated.

"Oh! Cookies!" Carroll exclaims happily. He doesn't even think about sharing with Cullen or
anybody else.

"I'm content to part with them if it saves us from this fool." Sten doesn't look content. Not at all.
Actually he looks quite sullen.
"Where did you get those?" Rori asks curiously. Usually she makes sure Sten has his share of cake and cookies. But these are none she gave him. He's far less grumpy then. Sometimes he even shares. He's already put on some weight ever since we got the horses and don't do that much walking anymore.

"There was a child -a fat slovenly thing- in the last village we passed," the Qunari explains. "I relieved him of these confections. He did not need more."

"You stole cookies from a child!?" Rori laughs after a moment of silent shock. "Sten! Such a big guy as you, scaring little children! Shame on you!"

"For his own good," Sten comments, completely unperturbed by Rori's amusement.

"Next time you relieve someone of something for their own good, please let me know. I'd like to be prepared for when the guards come to arrest us," Rori grins, shaking her head at the huge warrior. "Or you should take lessons with Leliana, she relieves people of things in a far less obvious manner..."

"You misunderstand my motive, kadan." Sten sighs when Rori just keeps grinning at him. It's hard to tell with his dark skin, but I swear he blushes...

"There's indeed more to our dear Sten than meets the eye," Leliana chimes in, beaming at him in a way that makes the Qunari frown suspiciously.

"What are you talking about, woman?" the Qunari growls.

"I saw what you were doing back there." Leliana smirks.

"Oh?" Sten already squirms a bit as everybody - absolutely everybody - is eavesdropping. We all act as if we aren't - well, not Oghren, he's staring bluntly - but the rest of us... even Cullen.

"Don't play innocent with me." Leliana utterly enjoys teasing Sten.

"What are you talking about?" Sten doesn't enjoy this, neither utterly nor in any other way. But the rest of us do. I for sure do. Hey, for once there's someone else getting picked on!

"You were picking flowers!" Leliana declares triumphantly. "I saw you entering the greenhouse behind the Spoiled Princess and there you were picking flowers!"

Sten: Shocked silence. Sten's companions: Muffled giggles. "No, I wasn't." Ah, denial. Someone should tell Sten that really won't work with the bard. Or just let him find out himself.

"You were!"

Sten: Abashed silence. Sten's companions: Choked laughter. "They were medicinal."

"Ahhh, so that's why you made a floral wreath of them and gave them to that little refugee girl," Leliana exclaims.


"You're a big softie!" Leliana teases mercilessly.

"We will never speak of this again," Sten mutters, glaring at us gloomily.

"Softie!"
This is certainly one of the biggest face-palm-moments ever for Sten. I feel with him. Honestly, I do. I really know how he feels. Now excuse me, I'm too busy laughing.
Big, big thanks to AuroraCousland for proof-reading. :)

Sending stones are mentioned in the third Dragon Age novel 'Asunder'. They are located at each circle and allow the circles to communicate with each other. It is also mentioned that the Divine possesses a sending stone. There's no description given of what they look like or how they work. I somewhat imagine them similar to the Palantir (Lord of the Rings).

"There is a... um... huge hole in the side of the tower, Cullen," I observe.

It is one of these clear winter days with the sun shining and as we sit in the boat we have a great view across the lake... and at the hole in the side of the tower, smoke billowing from it.

"Dagna," is all Cullen has to say about that matter, glaring pointedly at Rori. She grins back at him sheepishly and shrugs, causing the templar to chuckle and shake his head at her. He's certainly far more relaxed ever since Rori recruited Solona.

Seems Dagna has already made herself at home. She's become friends with Sandal, regarding him as her younger brother. Sandal adores her, and so does Bodahn. I'm glad she has found a new family that way since she has lost the one she left back in Orzammar.

"Don't touch that! Don't even think about it!"

Both Rori and I freeze with hands outstretched towards some funny looking crystal shards on Dagna's working table. We suddenly both recall the hole and the smoke and how Cullen had us all read handouts about what to do in case of an emergency. Greagoir developed an evacuation plan for the whole tower two hours after Dagna's arrival. Still, everybody seems in a far better mood with Dagna around. Templars keep dropping by for a chat with her, so do the mages. She's like a missing link, not a mage, not a templar, someone around whom everybody can relax - unless she blows a hole in the side of the tower. But even that was easily forgiven. She successfully turns the whole tower upside down. And she makes it a better place.

"That's the remains of the Circle's sending stone," Dagna explains, carefully examining one of the bigger shards with a magnifier. For me it's just broken glass. Nothing special about that. "It got destroyed during the rebellion. The bloodmages broke it, probably didn't want anybody to be able to get help."

"And what do you want with it?" Rori wonders. She has one hand hooked to her belt, with the other she holds on to mine. We hardly dare to blink or breathe in case Dagna is handling something dangerous and explosive.

"Well... at least I cannot blow it up... that's what Irving thinks or he wouldn't let me work with it..." Rori and I both relax a bit. "Listen," Dagna holds the shard close to her mouth. "Sandal?"

"Dagna? Enchantment?" Sandal's voice sounds from the shard. It's distant and blurred, still it's the
shard speaking with Sandal's voice when he is nowhere to be seen.

"He's only outside the door. The range is still a problem. And the quality of the sound. The shards only communicate with each other and some are just too small... but I think I can manage... perhaps... and make a set of mobile sending stones one could wear like an amulet," Dagna excitedly explains. "Wouldn't that be amazing?"

Okay, now I am impressed. This is... amazing indeed... and creepy. Really creepy.

"I want!" Rori exclaims. "But only if it doesn't explode..."

I'm a bit worried about Rori's decision to collect Jowan and Solona. She came up with this after our encounter with the broodmother. She now believes it's worth the risk to let Avernus push on with his researches. Especially since Solona has specialized on healing spells.

"This potion, can you mix it?"

Solona frowns at the wrinkled piece of paper Rori hands her as soon as she steps out of her cell down in the dungeons. She's in a far better condition than the last time we saw her. "What is this?"

"A protection against the darkspawn taint? At least I do hope it is. It did work in the Deep Roads. Nobody got infected."

"Morrigan's recipe? She gave it to you?" Now I have to admit, I am utterly surprised. I am about to reconsider my opinion about the witch when I notice Rori squirms and grins in that sheepishly guilty way that means nothing but trouble. I do know her too well by now. Still, I am shocked. I mean, I don't mind being nasty to Morrigan. She deserves nothing else... what really bothers me sometimes... often... is Rori's flexible morals. She has a way to bend them how it suits her best. "You... stole it from her?"

"Well... I asked and she said no... but this is important for the Wardens... so..." Rori shrugs and her grin grows even wider. At least she does realize she did something dodgy. I didn't expect anything else from Morrigan. She wouldn't do anything altruistic - not unless she got paid for it.

"Didn't you say Morrigan was your friend?"

"Err... yes?"

"Okay, let me get this straight... the witch who claims you are her only friend won't give you a recipe that can save a lot of people - and then you, claiming you are her friend, go and steal it from her?"

"Err... yes?"

"You two have a very strange definition of friendship." This gives me a headache.

"I think Morrigan wanted me to steal it," Rori explains. "Because she couldn't give it to me without admitting she's not as tough and ruthless as she pretends to be... does that make any sense?"

"No." Nothing Rori ever says about Morrigan makes sense to me.

"She's not as mean as you believe her to be."

Like that. It makes no sense at all.

"Then what is she?"
"Vulnerable," Rori says softly. "And lonely. And scared. Her bitchiness is her shield."

Are we still talking about Morrigan? Mean, selfish, ruthless, arrogant, viperish Morrigan? Sometimes I am astonished at how naive Rori is. But I am a templar... kind of... a wannabe-templar... although I never wanted to be a templar... so I would be a not-wannabe templar, right?... anyway, I won't be fooled by some apostate witch. No way.

"You keep telling yourself that," I mutter. "I keep watching your back."

"Can't you at least try and be a bit nicer to her?" Rori suggests in a hardly audible voice. I stare at her as if she has sprouted a second head. One that looks like Morrigan's and has a forked tongue.

"She's mean! Do you ever really listen when she talks to me? She's acting as if I was something distasteful, foul, smelly... unpleasant. Really, Rori, did you hit your head somewhere? You didn't touch anything in Dagna's laboratory, did you? Maker!" I feel a bit hurt that Rori would defend Morrigan - and ask me of all people to be nice to her. What about me and my feelings? Morrigan keeps stomping around on them and Rori has not yet told her to be nice to me, has she? I cross my arms in front of my chest and sulk. Rori rolls her eyes at me and sighs. Now I am really offended. I just can't think of something witty and mean to say to her right now. So I just stick my tongue out at her and keep sulking.

"At least you got the recipe, right?" Solona comments, not caring to bite back her chuckling. "I can make this potion. How much do you need?"

"As much as you can possibly produce? And could you have a look at it... find out what it does and how it does what it does? Maybe one can improve it?"

Seems Rori has already thought about that for some time. Seems she doesn't tell me everything. Seems it's time for some serious conversation.

About Morrigan. About Avernus. About the plans she has and where she is heading, dragging me along. Hey, it was her saying I should take care of myself more often. So that's what I will do... She's not the only Grey Warden here...

And I so won't have her wrap me around her little finger. Not this time! No, I will stay strong and not let my willpower falter... no matter what she does to try to convince me... Maker! I could think of a few things she could be doing that would totally convince me of anything... Blast!... Now I am thinking of a few things... uhm...

Don't look at her, Alistair! Don't look... oh, blast!... How that blouse is stretched by her magnificently large bosom... with her nipples, hardened by the cold down here in the dungeons, pressing against the cloth... and those rosebud lips, how she wets them with the tip of her tongue... how her hips sway when she walks...

I wanted to talk to her, didn't I?

So, here I go! I clear my throat to catch her attention. I open my mouth. Rori looks at me expectantly. Smiling wickedly, she stretches like a cat would do... And I... I stare at her boobs.

Duh...

Err...

Um...
I close my mouth again and grin foolishly. She smiles knowingly and kisses the tip of my nose. No, no, I'm not feeling like a complete retard now! I am feeling like an utterly retarded, completely foolish, outstandingly idiotic moron.

Blast!

Okay, I should take my time, collect my thoughts and put sentences together in my mind. It's pretty hard since I have these images popping up in my mind instead... I only half listen to Solona asking questions about Cullen. Seems he didn't visit her while she was stored for the Grey Wardens. His willpower certainly beats mine.

"Solona asked about you," Rori greets Cullen when we run into him on our way to the guest quarters.

"She did?" He blushes a deep crimson and nervously rubs the back of his neck. "What did she say?" he blurts out after a moment of inwardly fighting with himself.

"She was sad you never visited her," Rori says accusingly. "And she asked if you were alright."

"Tell her..."

"Why don't you tell her yourself?"

"I... I can't. Templars and mages... it's not meant to be. And she'll leave. I am just glad she... you know."

"You should talk to her, Cullen," Rori mercilessly insists. "Strong, tough templar as you, talking to a girl shouldn't be that big a challenge."

Cullen is so horrified by the mere thought of having to confront Solona and tell her how he feels about her, that all he can do is stammer incoherently. I feel sympathy for him. "It's... not as easy as you make it sound," he finally manages to say.

"Rise to challenges and seize your opportunities," Rori chimes, beaming at him brightly. Cullen glares at her as if he happily strangled her. "That's what Wynne keeps telling me and I keep looking at her just the way you look at me now," she laughs. "Come on, she'll leave with us tomorrow. This is your last chance."

"What chance?" Cullen grumbles. "There's nothing there for me... and her... She's a... mage." He spits the last word out as if it was something foul. Rori kicks his shin for this - and afterwards hobbles around on one foot, cursing herself and Cullen and me - for laughing at her - and most of all the greaves of his armour.

"All right! I'll talk to her..." Cullen finally gives in. Muttering to himself, the young templar marches off, looking anything but happy. Rori, however, is rather pleased with herself.

And I... well, I am still contemplating about the serious conversation I am going to have with her right now.

"Rori..." My voice sounds so husky. It's not supposed to sound like that. I want it to be stern and strong and unwavering. Instead I just sound like a horny fool... okay, I am a horny fool... Come on, Alistair, pull yourself together!

"Alistair?" Rori purrs, casting an upwards glance at me that makes my knees get all weak and wobbly.
Stay strong! Show that woman she cannot do whatever she pleases and not inform you about it. Show her you got your own opinion and that you won’t just swallow everything she tries to feed you...

"Bedroom. Now." Whoa! Hey! Wait! That's not what I wanted to say... I wanted... oh, blast it! Who cares anyway... If the world ends I at least can say I got thoroughly laid before...

Rori seizes me by the front of my shirt and pulls me into her room. Why they still make the effort of giving us separated rooms is totally beyond me. Her lips capture mine, her nimble fingers tear at the breeches of my pants, my shirt is lost somewhere on our way... and all that before we're even through the door.

"You've hurt my manly feelings, you know. All of them!" I murmur while she sinks to her knees to pull my pants down.

"There's more than one?" she asks, grinning up at me mischievously.

"Ow! And there she's doing it again!" I clap my hands over my heart. "Ohhhh.... Maker's Breath!"

"Forgive me, my prince," Rori whispers against the tip of my erection. "Please allow me to make up for my effrontery." She lazily strokes her hand up and down my length, making it absolutely impossible for me to speak. All I can do, is groan loudly. "I take this as your Highness' permission," she purrs, running her tongue all the way up my shaft.

She's such a beast!

I have problems to keep standing when she sucks me into the hot cavern of her mouth. Thankfully the door in my back offers some support. My fingers entangle with her hair as she bobs her head to push me deeper into her mouth and all the way out again.

I have already forgotten what I actually wanted to talk to her about. Or why I was mad at her first place. Was I mad at all? Blast, I cannot remember...

All I know, is how wonderful it feels to have her suck me off...

... that does remind me of something I was wanting to try...

"Get. Into. Bed," I manage to gasp. It takes me a little longer to figure that I have to stop pushing her head down on me and let go of her so that she actually can do as she's told. A whole lot of kissing and fumbling later we both tumble into bed together - and I turn her around at once, so that she's facing my manhood and her legs are planted on both sides of my head, so I am...

"If you sat on my face...," I offer as an explanation when Rori frowns at me over her shoulder.

"You want me to... what?... sit on your face?" Rori laughs. "Oh well, your desire is my command, my prince." And then she just flops down on my face. Well... I guess, I asked for it...

"HMPH!" I find my rather prominent nose buried in her folds completely... That's not how I meant it to be! I really should reconsider my choice of words...

"Have you been talking to Zevran again, Alistair?" Rori giggles, when I shove her off my face.

"You know I never talk to the elf. If anybody talks then it's him," I pout, gasping for air. "And I only want you to kind of sit on my face... like almost... just hover above it... with your..."
"Hehehe." Rori has one of her infamous gigglefits. She's as red in the face as I am - just for a different reason. The cot is so narrow, she topples over and with a thud hits the floor. The giggling still doesn't stop.

"Stop giggling, silly woman. This is serious." I should have just let her suck me off and leave it that way... But no! I had to have one of my brilliant ideas.

"Oh? And there I always thought, sex was for fun. My mistake," she laughs as she crawls back into bed. Seeing my face she kisses the tip of my nose teasingly. She's really on a mission today. The stomp-Alistair-into-the-ground type of mission. My manly feelings by now are all shrivelled and shrunk and... HEY! No! I am NOT talking about THAT! Why does everybody always believe manly feelings are all about a man's most private parts...

"Fun, huh?" Alright, I am going to give her fun. Next I tackle her, pin her to the bed with my weight and thoroughly tickle her until she can hardly breathe anymore. She kicks and screams and giggles and begs for mercy. HA! She can beg all she wants, I do not know no mercy! I flip her around and pull her to lie across my knees with her pretty little ass raised high. She's still laughing when the first smack hits her.

"HELP!" Rori cries in between her shrill shrieks and violent gigglefit.

Blast experimental exertions! I am done with that for tonight. Instead I fling Rori around once more - she has just the right size to be manhandled - and thrust into her tight entrance from behind. She cries out in surprise, lust and pain. I slow down at her immediately but before I can even say sorry, she hisses at me: "Shut up and keep fucking me!"

"Huh?" I am so stunned, shocked, completely flabbergasted that I stop moving altogether.

"Alistair!" Rori wails in utter exasperation, rocking against me to push me deeper into her.

"You... you sure? I mean... I... I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"You don't want to discuss this now, do you?" she snaps, glowering at me over her shoulder. I grin stupidly and shrug, she hisses...

I keep her waiting until she loses her patience with me and tries to push me off her. That's when I slam back into her. She gasps and grabs the bedframe for support. It's not exactly a very stable bedframe. Actually it's no more than a quite flawy cot. With every strong thrust, the bed rocks against the wall, protesting noisily against the maltreatment. Rori doesn't protest at all. She cries out her pleasure loud enough for the whole tower to hear. I lose myself in the mind shattering sensation of our rough lovemaking, giving in to my body's desire. The bed gives in, too. It simply collapses with a loud crash.

"Ow!" Rori groans when she is buried beneath my weight. Then she begins to laugh uncontrollably.

There's a heavy knock at the door. We both freeze, the only sounds are Rori's muffled giggles and her hiccup.

"Is anybody dying in there?" Cullen's voice sounds through the closed door. "Just in case, there's two templars standing in front of that door, ready to break it down."

"NO!" I shout. "Everything's just fine. We're only... we're... um...err... "

"Sparring," Rori chimes in.
"Sparring?" Carroll's sullen voice sounds from just outside the room. "Why is our sparring nothing like theirs?"

"Because you got the wrong sparring partner, Carroll," Cullen growls. "Could you two in there turn the noise of your... sparring... down, please?"

We can. For the next ten minutes after the templars left, we lie perfectly still - except for Rori's hiccup. Okay, maybe it's not ten minutes before we pounce each other again... but it certainly is five... three? Two? One?

The next morning we leave the Circle again with Jowan and Solona in tow. Greagoir is both worried and glad to see us take the mages with us. Cullen offers a ton of advice for me how to handle so many mages at one place together. One can break it down to: Kill them as soon as they as much as appear somewhat weird. Very helpful indeed.

Solona is beaming like she got the sun shining out of her ass - Oghren's words, not mine. She even squeals from time to time. Her large brown deer eyes gleam, her cheeks are flushed.

"What?" I laugh when she grins at me. I have never seen Solona this happy. No surprise there. First time I ever saw her she was being dragged to be put through the Rite of Tranquillity by the man she loved. And afterwards she sat in a cell... alright, the cosy version of a cell... and had to digest the news that she would become a Grey Warden.

"Cullen," she squeaks. "Cullen! Kissed! Me!"

"No!" Rori, Leliana and I gasp unison.

"Yes!" Solona exclaims giddily. "Okay, not on the mouth. Just a peck on the cheek... but... ohhhhh!" Then the smile is wiped off her face. "But I will never see him again. Not ever." She sighs heavily. "Life is a bitch... but... he kissed me! Now I do know he cared. That's somewhat comforting... Although he said he would have killed me if I had failed my Harrowing... and if I hadn't submitted after Jowan fled..." She sounds sad now, confused. "All this templar and mages shit is so... fucked up."

"Nobody could give me news about Lily," Jowan sadly remarks. It's as if he had emptied a bucket of ice cold water over Solona's head. "You are so lucky, Sol."

"Lucky? Jowan, you stupid fucker, you and your lover almost got me killed. I trusted you when you said you didn't use bloodmagic. And then it turns out, you do... did. I... I...

Jowan doesn't see it coming. I do. Rori does. But none of us gives him a warning when Solona punches him in the face. She almost falls off her horse doing so, but she is thoroughly pleased with herself when blood comes spurting from his nose.

"I am not going to heal that," Wynne calls from behind.

Shortly after leaving Kinloch Hold, we run into a group of refugees heading south.

"Someone should tell them that's totally the wrong direction," I mutter as they pass by in a hurry. "Heading south towards the horde, when they should go as far north as they possibly can."

"Yeah, they make me look bad in front of Sten," Rori laughs but she doesn't sound amused. Neither her mood nor mine get any better when the by now too familiar tingle in our heads alarms us of approaching darkspawn. We make short work of them.
One would think the refugees would be somewhat grateful for being rescued. Well, they aren't.

"Grey Wardens, aren't you?" a tired looking man spits into our faces when Rori and I approach the refugees. "Where have you been when the darkspawn drove us out of our homes? Where have you been when those monsters flooded Crestwood Village? Do you realize how many drowned there?"

Crestwood is almost at the coast. Darkspawn so far north? Rori and I exchange a worried look. Have we dawdled for too long? Wasted too much time in the Deep Roads?

"Do you see that?" The furious man grabs Rori by the front of her leather vest and yanks her towards the cart pulled by two exhausted oxen. Several people lie on the cart, men and women and children. Their skin is pale and blotchy, their eyes hazy and feverish. It's the darkspawn taint. "Look what you've done!" the man snaps. "Aren't you Grey Wardens supposed to protect us?"

I free Rori from the man's grasp when he begins to shake her furiously. She's so stunned by his accusation; she just stares and blinks at him.

"I'm sorry... but... there's only the two of us," I try to calm the man down. "We cannot be everywhere!" It's impossible and still I feel guilty. I wish I could have helped these people. I wish I could save them all. The man won't listen. He needs someone to blame so he blames the Grey Wardens... Rori looks as if she's about to burst into tears.

"Leave them alone!" Morrigan hisses, appearing right next to Rori as the ginger still tries to calm the man down. "Your misery is not their fault. Pull yourself together, you whining fool!"

Well... one could have broken this news to the man in a much gentler, much nicer manner... at least if one wasn't Morrigan.

"And you two, why are you wasting your time arguing with that moron? His home is lost, his family is dead. He should get over it and move on. And so should we." Thus said she turns on her heels and marches off.

Don't ever tell anybody... because I'd never admit this out loud... but Morrigan has a point there. I'd never act like her. I still feel obliged to help the refugees, I still wish I could have saved those who died... But let's be realistic for once... It is impossible to save all of them. I have learnt that by now. It's a lesson I did not and will never like - but... we do have to keep going. If we don't defeat the archdemon, we all will die. That's what we are here for, to gloriously save the world. We are heroes! Kind of... wannabe heroes. Why does it feel so awful then and not heroic at all to leave those people behind?

"They will die, you know," Rori whispers to me while she watches the infected people on the cart. She has turned a whiter shade of pale. "And it won't be pretty. And they could infect those who take care of them..."

It takes me a while to figure what she's trying to tell me. "No! Rori, we can't do that! We cannot just kill them!"

"They die anyway. Look at them, to end their suffering is... an act of mercy."

Merciful Andraste! She's right - and still it is too terrible a deed to even think about it. Just sometimes one has to do things one doesn't like to do... not because you feel in your heart they are right but because they are the lesser of two evils.

It's easier than we thought to convince the refugees to leave the dying persons behind. They are almost relieved when we offer to take care of them. I wonder if they realize that we will kill them...
This is one of the hardest and toughest moments in my life.

The old man I lift from the cart weighs less than a child. He groans and writhes in pain. There’s fear in his eyes when he realizes what I am about to do... and gratitude.

Rori cradles a small girl in her arms, softly singing lullabies to the frightened child. Her face is swollen and blotched, she mutters incoherently in her fever, as she snuggles closer to Rori. A small smile tugs at the corners of the child's mouth the very moment Rori slides the slim blade of her dagger past the girl's ribs and right into her heart.

I feel like a murderer. I feel like I can never look at my own reflection again without seeing the face of a man who killed the innocent.

Right now it doesn't help much that all these people died a quick and mostly painless death, saved from the agony and suffering the taint would have brought them. It doesn't help that they did not die alone. It doesn't help that they were all grateful for the comforting words, for the soft tunes hummed or sung for them in moments of pain and despair, for the hugs nobody else dared to give them...

Their faces will haunt my nightmares forever. One more horror to add, one more thing to cope with when coping seems to become more and more impossible. My eyes are stinging badly from not crying... but I'd rather pick them out than give Morrigan another reason to bash me. At least she stays silent and spares us any of her nasty remarks.

Rori rides with me when we leave the smoking pyres behind. She's sobbing and with my face buried in her hair, I allow my own tears to flow. To know she is with me is comforting. At times like this all my other companions - some of them friends - seem so distant. Rori and I wouldn't be here without them. They follow the two last Grey Wardens on their journey, they fight with us, support us, their sleep is haunted by equal nightmares - equal but not the same. At this moment, I can feel the taint inside of me, how it slowly destroys me, kills me. It's often like that when I've been in close contact with the darkspawn or their corruption. It's as if the taint inside of me grows stronger, as if the poison spreads farther, contaminating me more and more. Only Rori knows how this really feels.

But while I am willing to accept my lot, she is determined to change it. Thus the reason why she has us drag along a cart with empty wine barrels. Well, they aren't all empty at first... But Oghren and Wynne solve that problem rather quickly with a little help from their friends when we next set up camp. Guess we all need a bit of tipsiness after that day. Leliana plays sad tunes with her lute; Rori joins in with her fiddle. We don't talk much, just drink and listen to the music, so sad and yet so beautiful. It's a cold clear winter night and we are huddled together around the campfire as if we were the last survivors in a destroyed world. Later I lie in our tent with my beloved woman in my arms, marvelling at how lucky a man I am. I don't think I deserve so much luck, but I am grateful for this mistake, more grateful than words can ever express.
The Archdemon Is Watching You!

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all the kudo-givers, bookmarkers, subscribers, commentors and readers in general. Your support is amazing.

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A sickly green sky stretches above me, dimly glowing with venomous clouds billowing around a distant source of light. I feel disoriented, lost and dizzy as I stumble through a barren and destroyed land, with bleached bones scattering the ground.

My body feels so heavy, I can hardly move. And the more I try the heavier it gets. With every forced step forward it seems as if I make two backwards. Cold sweat is pouring down my face, I freeze while I'm hot and my heart is pounding painfully fast in my chest. There's a weight squeezing my ribcage so tightly, I am afraid it's going to crush. Tripping over a skull, I fall to my knees.

That's when I hear it... a distant flapping sound growing louder and louder. Tilting my head back, I look up into the venomous sky... and there it is... the dragon... the archdemon.

I can feel it.

It's there in every fibre of my body, like thick, viscous poison spreading through me. Slowly, sickeningly, it eats me up from the inside. Thousands of worms and maggots seem to crawl beneath my skin, boring deeper into my flesh. I scream and tear at my armour, desperately trying to get to my bare skin. I have to rip it off of me, tear it away. I have to get the taint out of me.

The archdemon has spotted me... I cannot even crawl away. I flail helplessly on the ground, writhing and howling in agony. There's a pain drilling into my head as if a hot knife was poked from the inside of my skull against the back of my eyes.

The archdemon lands with a loud thud right above me, its claws digging into the ground next to me. Where it touches the ground, the earth withers and corruption spreads like a wildfire. Growling lowly, the beast lowers its head to look me right into the eye... its eyes are made of solid pitch black hatred and they bore into me mercilessly... I whimper, trying to escape its stare by covering my face with my arms...but I cannot move... there's no escape... The archdemon opens its huge mouth, blowing its foul breath right into my face, and it roars...

I wake with a startled cry. Soaked in sweat and still shivering, I try to regain control over my frantic self and find out where the fuck I am. My heart is thundering, the blood rushing through my veins is unbearably noisy in my ears. Bloody blasted fucking shit... what was that?

Next to me someone's sobbing... Rori?

"Alistair?" she feels around for me in the darkness, clinging to my arm. She's trembling.

"You're awake!" I'm still so confused; nightmare and reality are hard to distinguish. "Did... did you dream, too?"
"Yes," she breathes, pressing closer to me, her fingers digging into the bare flesh of my shoulders.

"It was like the archdemon saw us... saw us... what does that mean?" I hold on to her as if my life depended on it. The contact reminds me that this is real, that the archdemon is not here - not yet here - to get us. The darkness around us is thick with fear. Outside the dog is barking madly. Did he dream, too?

"I don't know. It's as if it took notice of us... I... Alistair, I'm so scared..."

"I think..." I begin, comfortingly stroking her hair. Suddenly I freeze, my eyes widening in shock. "Wait... Did you hear that?" The only sound outside are Barkley's frantic barking and Shale telling the stupid dog to shut up. But that's not what I mean - and Rori knows. It's a noise that's in our heads only, by now a far too familiar tingling, like a screaming headache that feels like it's going to split your skull open.

"Darkspawn!"

Rori and I stumble out of the tent, almost tripping over each other as we shout to alarm our sleeping companions. Rori wears nothing but my shirt, I wear nothing but my smallclothes - and call myself lucky that I did put them back on after making love to Rori or I'd be out here in the cold winter night completely naked. Barefooted we run through the snow, clutching our weapons. I can sense the darkspawn close by. They have found us... I wish I could call it a coincidence... but after that dream I doubt it.

Sten appears in the ring of light around the fire, wearing full plate armour. Does he sleep in that thing? Does he sleep at all?

Oghren is at his heels... he's completely naked. At least he didn't forget to bring his axe. If not for the shriek appearing out of nowhere right in front of me, I'd be horrified by the sight. But the shriek beats Oghren by far.

I ignore the ice biting my feet and lunge into battle, cutting down darkspawn... and almost Sandal when he comes staggering out of the darkness, grinning stupidly. "Enchantment?" he claps his hands, bouncing up and down giddily while he beams at me. I stab the shriek suddenly looming over Sandal right in the face.

"Not now, Sandal!" I spin around to fend off another darkspawn. "We're under attack. Where's Bodahn?"

"Nice pyjamas, Sandal," Zevran comments, appearing next to me. "I'll take care of him, Alistair. You go and help Rori."

"Morrigan!" Rori shouts next to me, then darts off towards the witch's camping place a little aside the rest of the camp. Morrigan is surrounded by darkspawn, frantically firing spells at them. Cursing, I run after Rori, knocking a shriek out of my way with my shield. I hate when she just rushes somewhere, completely ignoring tactics, our team battle training, her own safety... With a loud cry, my fellow Grey Warden crashes into the mass of darkspawn, drawing their attention away from the cornered apostate. It works quite well.

A little too well.

Duncan once said, darkspawn recognize Grey Wardens as their natural enemies. As soon as they sense Rori and me, they charge us, leaving the witch alone. The blasted shrieks are wickedly fast and I find myself forced back into defence without much of a chance to fight back. I leave this to Rori
while I try to cover her back - and sides. She should hurry up a little. I'm already in for a special
treatment by Wynne. Luckily Morrigan freezes some of the bastards, buying us time until our
reinforcement arrives in form of Sten and the drunken dwarf.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Shale swinging a shriek like a dead cat. Barkley follows a
darkspawn into Solona's tent. The mage has never before been outside her tower. She's completely
lost - and sets her tent on fire when defending herself. Zevran rescues her with the dog's help while
Leliana, Wynne and Jowan fend off the darkspawn. Sandal meanwhile seems to believe this is all a
whole lot of fun. At least Bodahn has returned with Darrian in tow and keeps Sandal out of our way.

One of the shrieks turns out to be no shriek at all. The creature can still be recognized as the elf it has
once been. It shrinks away from Rori when she comes rushing for it. "No, don't. Go away. I do not
want to... hurt you... hurt anybody..." It attempts to run away but is drawn back to us like a puppet
on a string, only to force itself to turn away once more.

"Wait... who are you?" Rori calls after him, lowering her blades as not to scare the creature. I stay
wary, ready to attack should this thing make a wrong move.

"Was Tamlen," the creature snarls, hugging itself. "No longer now."

"Maybe we can... find help for you?" Solona wonders out loud as she draws closer with the rest of
the group. There's sympathy in her voice, sadness, fear. It's her first encounter with the darkspawn.
Rori shakes her head at the same time that I do. We both know better by now. It's what the taint does
when it doesn't kill you. Like Hespith this unfortunate elf has turned into a ghoul. The taint inside of
him has to be stronger than with the dwarf. She at least could still form coherent sentences. Tamlen
has already lost too much of his humanity.

"No. No help for me," the creature croaks, clutching its head. A strangled gurgling sound escapes its
throat as it sobs. "The song in my head, it calls to me. It sings to me. I can't stop it."

"We could take him to Avernus..." Rori mutters, but her voice fades away when I sharply glare at
her. Where she gets these ideas from is totally beyond me.

"Avernus can't do anything for him but use him for his research," I snap, causing her to wince.
"Rori, this man is no different from the refugees we killed. We have to end his life. It's better for him.
It's a mercy."

"You know, mercy begins to sound a lot like a euphemism for death," Rori sighs when we show our
mercy once more and slay the ghoul that once was Tamlen. I wonder where he came from, how he
was infected, if his family knows what happened to him... All we can do for him, is pay him our last
respect and burn his body properly.

"Is everybody okay?" Rori asks once the fight is over. "Wynne, Solona, make sure everybody is fine
and won't fall off their horses. We shouldn't stay here any longer in case the archdemon has some
more surprises for us. How could it know where we are?"

"The archdemon itself? How unnerving," Leliana exclaims, as she passes by, avoiding to step into
puddles of black ichor and bright red blood. "That's not good, is it? No, certainly not good... Has
anybody seen Schmooples? Schmoople-Doople, where is my little darling?" And off she runs into
the night in search of her rabbit-pig.

"I guess it's like Duncan once said," I mutter with clattering teeth. Only now that the fight is over, do
I realize how cold it actually is, as I stand barefooted in the snow. "We can sense them. And they can
sense us. We'd best be more careful from now on. This camp isn't safe any longer."
"This camp has never been safe, you fool," Morrigan snorts as she marches back to her destroyed tent. Cursing she pulls her precious grimoire out of the chaotic mess. "Hmph, what do they send next? Darkspawn tax collectors?"

"What? No traps. No ambush." Zevran snorts, sounding quite amused. Solona tends a deep cut at his inner thigh. He seems rather delighted about that, pretending to be far more hurt than he actually is. The mage seems rather amused by him. "Some assassins!"

"As if your trap and ambush worked so well," I mutter, causing Zevran to clap his hands over his heart as if I had struck him there.

"Aw, Alistair, my dear friend, you hurt my feelings," he slurs, wiping a non existent tear from the corner of his eye.

"And no bosom where you could rest your head for comfort," I grin. Rubbing it in now that I - unlike the elf - have access to the most beautiful bosom I can imagine? Yes, totally. I admit, I have a bitchy side.

"Oh, I don't mind some broad manly shoulders either," the elf chuckles and winks at me. Solona unsuccessfully tries to bite back a giggle.

Err... okay, this was funny... until now... now it's a bit... creepy...

"Sorry, Zev, these broad manly shoulders are already occupied," Rori laughs, snuggling to me. Sometimes I am a bit worried about our sanity. We are surrounded by the corpses of about a dozen or more shrieks that attempted to murder us, plus one unfortunate ghoul - and we are back to joking already. I can still feel the anxiety caused by the nightmare, I'm alert, scanning the area - and I jest about bosoms... Oh, well, life is short. One should enjoy it as long as it lasts - and bosoms certainly make this world a more beautiful place...

"What do you estimate are the chances of success, Qunari?" the golem inquires while she waits for the rest of us to be mended together again. She sounds unsure, startled by the attack. I can't blame her. If the archdemon can find us two Grey Warden recruits here somewhere in the middle of nowhere, how can we even hope to outsmart it?

"For the Grey Warden?" Sten asks as monotonously as always. He doesn't even wince when the mages tend his wounds. The shrieks have given him quite some trouble. He's huge, he's heavy - and getting heavier with all the cookies and cake he keeps stuffing into himself whenever he has a chance - and he's slow. Shrieks are tremendously fast and they have these nasty talons, long and sharp enough to cut through armour like a tin opener. "Little to none."

"Hey!" I protest, although I do know Sten is right. The last four Blights lasted for years... and there is no way we have that much time to save Ferelden. The archdemon will strike soon, too soon, and we will only have one chance to defeat it. Still, it feels much better to tell oneself that there is still a chance, that we can actually do it, even if I'm fooling myself... I want to believe in Rori, in us. "Ever heard of something called moral support? Something like: Yay! You can do this!" Sten just glares pointedly at me. "Self-deception can be very helpful, you know. I do that all the time."

"No surprise there," Morrigan snorts.

"So, why does it follow?" Shale asks after a moment of consideration. She sounds confused. And she completely ignores me. Some things never change. It's somewhat comforting. "I do not risk death, but it does."
"My mission is no different from the Grey Warden's," Sten patiently explains. "I must see this through to the end."

"The end of the archdemon," Rori calls from the other side of the camp where she helps Jowan and Zevran strapping our belongings to the horses. Rori is the queen of self-fooling. I guess, as our leader she has to be optimistic for the rest of us. She has to be stronger than anybody else, like Cailan had to seem confident about the battle at Ostagar when he truly was expecting a defeat. I would never have guessed considering his behaviour. And now I feel ashamed that I believed him to be a spoilt moron back then.

Rori has her moments when she is close to giving up. But she never does. I guess, that's what finally won Sten over. After all his criticism, he now acknowledges her stubbornness as an extraordinary strength.

"It would rather perish than give up its quest?" the golem wonders.

"Indeed. There is honour to be salvaged in such a quest, no matter its chances."

"Honour is a curious thing. It is far better to be practical."

"What use is practicality when it leads to cowardice and emptiness? It is better to live well, than to live," Sten patiently explains.

That's how I felt when becoming a Grey Warden, that my life had a cause now when before it was wasted. Cullen certainly would disagree. And I don't mean that being a templar is a waste of time all together... I mean, it is important. And honourable. And... okay, now I'm getting confused. Anyway, this is my mission and I am not going to run away no matter the chances... and if there's a chance at all then Rori will use it. I am confident of that.

"An, uh... interesting theory," the golem mutters, frowning thoughtfully. It looks funny when she frowns with all those little cracks appearing on her forehead.

"There is worth in your life, Shale," Sten assures her. He sounds serious and almost... gentle. "There is value, but only if it is used."

Hey, this is the first time that Sten makes sense to me - and I even agree!

Okay, I'd rather have him be a bit more supportive and optimistic about our chances of success... It would make things easier for Rori. She pulls all her strength and confidence from somewhere inside of her. How such a petite, young girl can be so incredibly tough is beyond me. She keeps saying she finds her strength in her love for me. Only tonight she told me, I am her pillar of light in this darkness... I had to laugh so hard, it made me snort my drink out through my nose as she was holding on to my erect manhood at the same time... it was a rather silly moment and we were rather tipsy... anyway... what was I actually talking about? And why do I always end up wanting to make love to Rori in the most impossible moments? Like... now... when the white shirt she's wearing... my white shirt... my by now wet white shirt... is clinging to her skin and her hard nipples press against the cloth... She's shivering, freezing and I so want to make her get warm...

Blast!

I am only wearing my smallclothes and it hardly hides anything... especially not that bulge...

Wynne, taking care of my injuries, is grinning at me like a cat that swallowed the pigeon. I quickly clap my hands over that treacherous part of my body and, blushing violently, I hope beyond hope that she has not noticed. The granny mage chuckles and shakes her head.
"Honour is not to be neglected, Sten," Rori laughs, patting the Qunari's shoulder as she walks by to fetch herself and me some dry and warm clothes. Too bad. That was not how I was planning to get her warm. "I envision something greater, though... the defeat of the archdemon, ending the Blight, saving the world... I've never been the type for doing things by halves."

That is a rather apt description of her character. Even Sten has to admit that. And... he smiles! He tries to hide it behind his large hand but I am positive the corners of his mouth curled upwards.

Before we leave, Rori has the empty wine barrels filled again - with the darkspawn knocked out but still alive. And she doesn't even have to hunt them down since they've come for us. Avernus will be delighted. Two apprentices, a big package of pure lyrium and the darkspawn he required for his research, Rori is ticking off the items on his purchase list rather quickly. Not doing things by halves, right?

Somehow winter seems the preferred season of assassins as four days later we run into a group that - for once - doesn't want to kill us... well, they do want to kill us but only as a side effect. Their target is actually Leliana. Rori doesn't think this to be as comforting as I do. Leliana is completely devastated that Marjolaine, the woman that was her mentor - and more - still tries to kill her. "I do not understand why," she whispers, running her fingers through her hair uneasily.

"Your ex-lover, isn't she?" the elf slurs, grinning lecherously at the bard. "I doubt there'll be some steamy make-up sex then? No? What a pity. The mere imagination..." He falls silent when Leliana turns away with tears in her eyes. "Brasca! I didn't want to make her cry." He stands there, looking helpless and lost until Rori comes along and hugs him before she moves on to hugging Leliana.

"Alistair, my dear friend," the elf sighs, trying to wrap an arm around my shoulder and fails because he's just too small for that. And I won't have him put it around my waist. We're not some blasted married couple! "This girl is the finest woman I have ever met. Worship her like the goddess she is, because you will never again find another one like her."

"You think I do not realize that?"

"I don't know, you seem a little slow-witted sometimes," the elf chuckles.

"I like you, too, Zevran," I sigh, grinning down at the sneaky bastard. Somehow Rori has changed my point of view regarding the former assassin. And he has proven to be a loyal friend so far. I begin to believe he deserves this second chance she's given him.

Leliana is very silent and brooding, mostly staying to herself all the way up towards Warden's Peak. I ride beside her for a while, trying to figure out something to say to her but I can't come up with anything but commenting stupidly about the weather. The silence threatens to become awkward and I sweat a little, feeling foolish, when Leliana suddenly asks: "Do you ever regret leaving the Chantry?"

"No, never. Do you?"

"Yes," she says softly, almost sadly. "You may not believe it, but I found peace there. The kind of peace I've never known." I do believe her, but Leliana's life has been different from mine. With what she has revealed about her past, the Chantry must have been a save haven for her. For me it was just a place where they stuck me because they didn't want to be bothered with me any longer.

"It used to get so quiet at the monastery that I would start screaming until one of the brothers came
running," I chuckle at the memory. "I would tell them that I was just checking. You never know, right?"

"I... no, I never did anything like that. I enjoyed the quiet." She doesn't sound as if she thinks this to be as funny as I do. Actually, not funny at all. Her view of the Chantry is more melancholic while I am just glad I escaped. I can't blame her, she sometimes longs to go back, especially now when her past comes crushing down on her again. Her faith is strong. She believes that the Maker has planned it all out for her, that she is part of something greater. Rori and I aren't sure if she is just fooling herself to feel better or if it's real. I'd say she's making it up if she wasn't so damn sure about what she says. Even the guardian at the temple of the sacred ashes blamed her to be no more than a pretender. It left her brooding for days but she didn't falter in her faith.

"Suit yourself," I laugh. "The look on their face was always priceless."

"You're so silly, Alistair." Leliana shakes her head at me but at least she smiles and punches my arm playfully. Mission successfully completed!
When Warden's Peak appears in sight, we all stop and gawk stupidly. The fortress doesn't look half as dilapidated as when we first came here. Walls have been rebuilt, roofs repaired; there's actually windows... and a whole village of huts and small houses clinging to the side of the mountain outside the fortress. And there's people. A whole lot of them. And most of them are elves. Above all that, high on the towers, there's a banner I've never seen before. On one side it bears the colours of the Theirin family as well as the Theirin mabari, on the other side of the crest there's the Grey Warden's colours with the silver griffon facing the mabari, all that is bracketed by the Cousland laurel wreath.

Oh blast!

"Oh, someone's been creative," Leliana observes. "They don't have much taste but their work certainly transports a message. The Grey Wardens, the last of the Theirins and the last of the Couslands working together to claim the throne of Ferelden and save the kingdom from a tyrant, the archdemon and the darkspawn. All that connected to Warden's Peak - am I the only one to find this rather ironic?"

Oh blast!

"Avernus must feel like it's history repeating," Zevran adds cheerfully.

"Let's just hope he doesn't get strange ideas about a demon army," Wynne mutters gloomily. "Really, Rori, my dear, why did you have to allow him to stay here and go on with his studies?"

Rori doesn't listen. She's too busy taking in the change and digesting the sight of the new banner. "Levi! Gilmore!" Rori cries when the two of them approach to welcome us. "What... what is that? Where have all the people come from? What are they doing here?"

"The bastard prince has gained quite a reputation," Gilmore explains after properly bowing to Rori and me. He has recovered from his injuries by now, looking far better than the last time we saw him. Even his leg isn't as stiff anymore. "News from the Circle and from Orzammar has spread..." The way Levi grins, he and his travelling family have done their best to spread as many news as possible all across the kingdom. "A lot of elves from Highever have arrived, too, next to the refugees from the south. There have been riots after Teyrn Cousland's death and Howe has put down the rebellion violently. Burnt down the alienage, that's what he did."

"That two-faced bastard!" Rori hisses, angrily wiping her tears away. It has to be tough for her to learn her hometown and her people have suffered and she couldn't do anything about it. "But... that banner... Gilmore! We cannot use that!"

The knight shrugs. "We didn't start the fire. That was you and the prince. You've made quite an impression. The tales they tell about you, if only half of them are true, you all are already a legend. These people believe in you and that is a strong motivation. I couldn't stop that anymore even if I wanted. I doubt even you could stop it."

"Oh Maker!" I groan. I never wanted this to happen. It's too big for me, more than I can handle and yet I am supposed to get everything done and make it right.

I need a drink.

I'd even take a sip of Oghren's flask although Zevran suspects it's dwarf piss - literally.
Our arrival hasn't gone unnoticed and people begin to gather around us. I find myself being pushed forward and everybody seems to expect me to do something great, some trick as if I was a trained animal going to jump through a loop - one that is on fire. People bow, they fall down to their knees, mutter my name as if it was an incantation, outstretched hands brush against my armour... and I keep muttering: "No, please, stand... that's not... really, get up again... there's no need to...

This is creepy... creeeeeepy...

I feel so lost and overwhelmed, weighed down by the expectations they have in me, I can hardly talk at all. How I get onto that huge box that serves as a makeshift dais, I don't remember. I stare at the crowd in horror; they stare back at me in awe. I am fucked...

"Err..." I begin, sounding like a complete retard. "You're expecting a speech now, aren't you? Oh blast..."

People start chuckling.

"You do realize that princes usually got scribes that write such speeches for them, don't you? And here I am without a scribe to save me from making a complete fool of myself. All I've got is my dear fellow Warden telling me to say something motivating and kingly... instead I am babbling a lot of nonsense, right?" I begin to sweat and grin stupidly, my brain is trying to catch up with my tongue but it is faster and ignoring the one and only conscious thought I still have: Shut up! I don't, though. I keep babbling, feeling as if some maniac babbling demon has possessed my body. "You have achieved much here at Warden's Peak and you can be proud of that. There's still a long way to go but if we have faith in the Maker and in our strength of endurance, in the stubbornness and doggedness of the Fereldan people, then we can succeed..."

"That's what we do. And what do you do?" someone calls from the crowd. That probably never happens to a real king. At least not when facing a crowd of farmers and craftsmen. In the Landsmeet, well, that's a different story...

"Me? Do something? Like... ´for real? Looking pretty with a crown on my head and holding foolish speeches is not enough?" I exclaim, eyes wide with shocked surprise. My audience laughs. I guess, I am at the safe side as long as they do not start throwing foul eggs and tomatoes. "Blast, someone should have told me, becoming king actually is hard work," I mutter. More laughter. Out of the corner of my eyes I can see Sten hiding his face in his hands and shake his head. Morrigan is rolling her eyes. Leliana is dragging Rori towards my makeshift stage, probably to have her make the best of my bad job.

"Before anybody ever got the idea I could possibly become king, I became a Grey Warden," I say calmly, solemnly. "And that's what I am first place: I am a Grey Warden. And Grey Wardens do whatever is necessary to stop the darkspawn. In Peace, Vigilance. In War, Victory. In Death, Sacrifice. That is the Grey Warden's motto. I will end this Blight or die trying. That is what I do."

There's a moment of stunned silence. And then there's cheering and people shouting my name and praising the Grey Wardens. It's insane. I have no idea what happened. I haven't said anything über-smart, have I? Certainly not.

"You believed in what you said," Rori explains when I ask her a short time later. My knees are still wobbly and I feel like floating five feet beside my own body. "They heard, saw and felt you were honest and true to your cause."

"Was I... kingly?"
"First... no," Rori admits.

I groan.

"But you were cute," she tries to comfort me.

I groan even louder.

"Then, when you talked about the Wardens... yes, you were very kingly then." Rori beams proudly at me. "And sexy," she adds in a purred whisper. The sound of her voice sends a tingling down my spine.

"I hate that," I complain sullenly. "I am no good at holding speeches. I am no good at being kingly. I do not know how to be kingly. It all happens by mere accident!"

"You are doing fine, Alistair," Leliana assures me. "You haven't been raised to become the leader of a nation. But that is part of your charm. They love you because you are one of them and yet you are special. They believe you will recognize their worries and sorrows and are more likely to make their lives better than some stuck up noble that's never left their castle."

And that's good? I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything at all. Eamon and his bloody blasted plan! Loghain and his damn treachery! Cailan, that stubborn idiot, and his insistence on fighting right at the centre of the battle next to a handful of Grey Wardens! What in the name of the Maker did he think he was doing? Did he think at all? At least the people of Ferelden are used to a moron running their country. That's comforting... Oh Maker, I am so fucked!

Avernus is high up in his tower and is completely unaware of what is taking place in the rest of the keep.

"He's too old and weak to actually climb the stairs," Gilmore says as he leads the way. Rori pointed out he didn't have to make the effort but he insisted. I cannot get rid of the impression, him carrying Solona's luggage, is quite a giveaway of his true intentions. He has been gawking at the young, dark-haired beauty ever since she was introduced to him. I certainly won't complain. It keeps him from gawking at Rori instead or paying too much attention of what she and I do. "How old is he? And why doesn't he eat anything? What does he live off?"

"Avernus has done a whole lot of very wicked and evil things. I doubt he recalls what really turned him into whatever he is," Rori muses. "Or he doesn't want to tell me."

"Could he be... a demon?" Jowan croaks, clearly terrified by the possibility. "Maybe he's possessed by one?"

I shake my head. "We made sure of that. As sure as one can be. There was a demon here in the keep, possessing the former commander's body. Avernus was keeping her locked in. Be careful anyway. The veil is thin here. It got repaired but still, this is a dangerous place."

Jowan has turned a whiter shade of pale. "I... I am not sure... maybe you should have left me at the tower. Maybe making me tranquil or killing me would have been a better choice... I do not want to hurt anybody anymore..."

"Then pull yourself together and make sure it doesn't happen," Rori snaps. She's fed up with Jowan's whining. He's been constantly wailing ever since we picked him up at Kinloch Hold. "This is your very last chance. If I wasn't sure you deserved it, you wouldn't be here. No! Don't thank me! You and Solona are here because you are needed. There's no turning back now, understand?"
Gilmore reluctantly leaves before we enter Avernus' laboratory. He'd rather come with us, but this is Grey Warden's business. Thus the reason we throw the nosy golem out as well once she has put down the darkspawn filled barrels.

"Lyrium," Rori says and drops the package on Avernus' working table. "Apprentices." She nods at the mages. "And darkspawn. Alive and still kicking." She knocks her knuckles against one of the barrels. A hissing noise is the answer.

"Hmph." That's all the praise one can expect from the ancient mage. "Why in the name of the Maker did it have to be shrieks?" he complains once we have locked the beasts into the cages that line the walls. They make a hell of a noise.

We cannot perform the Joining ritual with Solona and Jowan, still they get a far deeper insight into the Grey Warden secrets than Rori or I had before we were confronted with the goblet filled with darkspawn blood. They cannot work with Avernus without that knowledge. It is a shock for both of them, but they accept their fate.

"I am a dead man already," Jowan mutters. "Without you, I'd have died without being given the chance to make up for my crimes. Now, I have this chance and I will use it. Perhaps... perhaps one day Lily will forgive me..."

"This is... uhm... not exactly an ivory tower... and, well, you said it would be unpleasant. I guess, it's not worse than being made tranquil," Solona sighs, wrapping one dark curl around her index finger as she looks around the laboratory. "And that knight... he is cute..." She claps her hands together, rolls up her sleeves and presents a bright smile to Rori and me. "Should we get working then? Perhaps a spell to make those shrieks shut up would be a good start?"

I have my doubts about Jowan, but Solona, she's going to be an awesome Grey Warden.

Gilmore waits for us at the stairs that lead down towards Sophia's office. He greets us with a broad, boyish grin. "Done with your Grey Warden business? Good, there's someone who's dying to meet you, Lady Rori. And I don't dare to make them wait any longer."

"Fergus?" Rori asks hopefully and Gilmore's smile falls from his face.

"No, it's not him. I am sorry, I shouldn't have raised false hopes. Maker, I am such a inconsiderate fool!"

"Don't worry, Gilmore. You meant well." Rori hugs him briefly. She doesn't get to give him a proper hug because he practically jumps at the contact, murmuring something about how this is not appropriate behaviour for a young noble lady. Rori ignores him, stepping closer when he steps away until she has him cornered and can finally give him the hug he deserves.

"Stop being silly, Gil. We've been friends forever."

"We were children then," Ser Gilmore stammers, blushing violently. "Things have changed when... you turned into a young lady."

"You cannot be my friend anymore because I have breasts?" Rori doesn't sound amused.

"Err..." Poor Gilmore squirms and stutters. "It just isn't... that's not what a knight should do... I..."

I feel utterly sorry for him. We didn't have a good start and he still keeps glaring at me as if I was an abomination... still, I do know how he feels...
What he actually wants to say is, that it changed the moment he noticed he felt more for her than he should for a childhood friend. But he cannot tell her that. He'd rather cut his own tongue out before admitting to her that he's been having a crush on her for years. And she - of course - is completely oblivious.

She doesn't notice the way he looks at her or that expression on his face when he sees her with me. She is unaware of how his gaze follows her when she leaves the room, how he blushes when she addresses him and doesn't understand why he and I don't get along.

Gilmore stammers and stutters some more but it's hardly understandable. It's good to see that I am not the only one capable of making a complete fool of myself.

"Don't you want to meet that person Gilmore mentioned before?" I decide to rescue the knight. I really don't want to walk in his shoes. Sure, now there's Solona but for now she is clearly just a distraction.

And Solona... she's been talking about Cullen all the way from Kinloch Hold to Warden's Peak. Cullen's cute curls, Cullen's sexy smirk, Cullen being hot in his armour, Cullen, Cullen and - yep - Cullen.

They both seek some comfort, it seems. I do hope they find what they are looking for.

Gilmore takes his chance and leads us into the kitchen. Barkley is the first to bounce through the door, barking happily.

"What is that? That's what you call a clean pot? If I can't see my reflection in it then it is not clean...," a screeching voice complains. "Who let that dog into my kitchen... get out you flea-infested... Barkley?"

The dog is bouncing around an old woman with a sour look on her face, her grey hair pulled up in a tight bun.

"Nan!" Rori exclaims, pouncing the old cook.

"Lady Rori..." For a second a smile forms around the old hag's lips. Then she spots Gilmore and me. "Hey, you! Yes, you, get out of my kitchen. I just had that floor scrubbed and now you come here with your muddy boots." She swats a kitchen towel at Gilmore and me. "Lady, take that dog out of here. How often do I have to tell you that the dog is not to enter my kitchen... Don't look at me like that, you beast..."

Grinning Rori smacks a kiss to the old woman's cheek and I can see her melt.

"She came here with the elves," Gilmore explains while we obediently stand at the threshold of the kitchen, not daring to enter. "They took her with them when they fled from the castle same way Rori escaped. Had to drag her along as she insisted on bashing some heads in with her pan."

"You sound... surprised? About the elves..." I can totally see Nan in battle mode, lunging herself at Howe's killers with her pan raised.

"Well, you don't know Nan, your Highness. Nan and elves... I never got the impression they liked each other much."

"Don't be ridiculous, lad," Nan snorts. "I bark at anybody." Unfortunately that's when she takes notice of me. "And who would you be?"
"I am Alistair, ma'am." The way she scrutinizes me I am expecting her to force me to scrub pots until my fingers bleed.

"Prince Alistair Theirin," Rori corrects my timid introduction.

"Now you mention it. Looks a lot like Cailan, doesn't he? Ah, Cailan, he was such a rascal. Loved my sweet buns, though. Always came to my kitchen with Fergus to steal some." She chuckles at the memory. "It is a shame what happened to him. It's even more a shame what happened to the teyrn and the teyrna. And my poor darling Oren. When you go to get Howe, Lady Rori, you take me along. I have a bone to pick with that treacherous scumbag."

Soon the three of us sit together at the kitchen table; eating Nan's freshly baked sweet buns that we dip into hot chocolate. I feel like a little boy again, when I sat in the kitchen of Redcliffe Castle at rainy days. This is one of the most peaceful moments for a long time. It feels a bit like coming home. I don't even mind that Nan keeps calling me Cailan.
"Do you think Leliana is going to be alright? With Marjolaine being dead now and... It has to be awfully hard for her," I ask.

"Alistair, my dear friend, please concentrate on the task at hand," Zevran slurs as we are dragging a dead man down the corridor of a place called the Pearl. It's one of Howe's men and the last of four we have to throw out of the window facing the harbour. The bastards tried to murder us, set up a rather stupid trap for anybody who would support the Grey Wardens. Strangely the Crows pointed us their way. Rori and Zevran are still wracking their brains why they would do so. They have not yet come to a conclusion.

"Why didn't we just leave them in that room?" I grunt as I heave the heavy corpse in heavy armour out of that tiny, narrow window. I am rewarded with a distant splashing sound when the body hits the water.

"No, no, no, my clueless friend, believe me, when I say, you never want to piss off a bordello queen. So you always clean up your mess before you leave. You live longer that way."

"And where does that wisdom come from?"

"Ahhh, I grew up in a place such as this," the elf points out. With a hint of melancholy he looks around and sighs. "They say you can never go home again, but for ten silvers an hour you can get pretty close."

"I'll give you that," I admit. "But... Leliana...," I return to what has been bothering me ever since the young bard ran her former lover and mentor through - and then held her in her arms when she died.

"She'll need time - and her friends. Her faith will help her, too. I think, she'll manage. She's tougher than you believe her to be." Rori whispers. She keeps cave, making sure nobody stumbles in on us to witness how the elf and I discard our victims.

"Really? She seems so young and sweet and innocent, you know."

"I am older than you are, Alistair," Leliana points out on returning from luring one of the customers away before he could detect us. She smiles one of those wicked smiles that are always somewhat creepy. It can't hide, though, that she has been crying. "And far from innocent... you are so adorably clueless, little templar. I've done many things I am not proud of. There's more than one reason why I sought refuge in the Chantry."

"Uhm... and still you look sweet and innocent," I mutter, blushing violently. Somehow I can't imagine Leliana as a cold and calculating killer. I mean, I have seen her fight and she knows how to handle herself but... even Rori appears tougher and feistier compared to the bard.

I can't even imagine Leliana as... well, she's not... she's a Chantry sister and so I... can't look at her
like I look at Rori... of course I would never look at any other woman like I look at Rori... I mean...
Rori is Rori and Leliana is... well, Leliana... and to me she is not a woman... although I do know she
is a woman of course...

Maker, I am babbling again...

All I want to say is... if I had a sister - a real one, and not that shrew Goldanna they made me believe
was my sister - I wish she was like Leliana.

"Aww, that's so nice of you, Alistair. You're so cute!" And Leliana pinches my cheeks again. She's
worse than Wynne.

"Why do you always have to go on about how cute I am?" I pout. "I am not cute... and even if I was,
is that all I am?"

"You are funny," Rori grins.

"And a little awkward," Leliana adds mercilessly. "And slightly goofy."

"In short: you are absolutely adorable." Rori tiptoes to kiss the tip of my nose while Leliana goes
awwww!

"You two sound as if you are talking about Schmooples," I sulk, trying unsuccessfully to bite back a
grin. "I hate you. Both of you. And stop giggling, you silly women. Being as awkwardly funny and
goofily cute as I am is hard work, especially on an expert level."

"As much as this reminds me of home and as much as I enjoy your little banter, we shouldn't dwell
here any longer," Zevran interrupts. "We don't know if there's more of Howe's men... we don't know
if this isn't a trap by the Crows after all."

After she's been putting up a brave front for so long, Leliana decides it's time for her to seek solitude
in the Chantry and comfort in her prayers to the Maker. After that, some shoe shopping for Shale and
for herself. She insists that's exactly what she needs now. It wouldn't be my first choice after killing
my former lover - not that I have any - but I won't argue with the bard.

While Zevran greases the palm of the madam of the house, Rori gets drawn into a fight between two
rather angry men and a rather smug woman in a sleeveless white blouse with a plunging neckline.
With her blue bandana and that thick golden collar around her neck she looks like the incarnation of
a pirate queen. I don't know what her trouble is about; I am too busy trying to convince a rather
impertinent customer that neither Rori nor I are for sale. I don't even get what he wants until he
gropes Rori's breasts and she punches him so hard in his face that his nose breaks while I am still
standing there in shocked palsy with my jaw having dropped open.

The guy shoves Rori and she stumbles backwards into some other guy who just gets spiked by the
Rivaini lady. Next I grab the bastard by the back of his shirt and send him flying across a table while
the Rivaini just dances around Rori - I mean, literally... She wraps one arm around Rori's waist,
grabbing hold of her left hand and swirls her aside, fencing with her second opponent at the same
time.

She pirouettes Rori around once more, disarms her opponent, flings Rori into a dip and runs the
unfortunate man through. Then she grins a white toothed, broad smile at the completely stunned
ginger in her arms - and kisses her.

"Thank you for the dance, sweetheart," the Rivaini purrs while Rori is too shocked to say anything at
all. She just lies in the pirate queen's arms, blinks and gawks.
Same here.

I mean, I don't lie in anybody's arms. But I just saw a woman smooch my woman. That's... err... oh Maker! Part of me is in high dudgeon - although I think I better refrain from the idea of a duel to restore Rori's tarnished honour... Part of me is like: Can... can I see that again? Merciful Andraste... I should have gone to the Chantry with Leliana instead. Some prayers to ask for forgiveness for my sins sound like a mighty good idea...

"Isabela!" Zevran steps over one of the corpses, handing another few coins to the madam of the house to ensure her goodwill for yet more mess and trouble we bring to her brothel.

"And look who we have here!" the Rivaini exclaims on sight of the elf, putting Rori back to her feet. The poor girl's legs are rather wobbly and she hurries to hide behind me, poking her head around my side to warily watch the dark skinned temptress. Her eyes are huge and round with shock, her whole face has taken on the colour of a ripe tomato and she keeps touching her lips as if she still cannot believe what has just happened. "Have you come to apologize for leaving me bereft of my lord husband and then vanishing without a trace?"

"You know it was just business, Isabela. Business that's turned out well for you, I see. You inherited the ship, I take it."

"Err... wait... you... you murdered her husband?" I'm unsure what I am more shocked about. Zevran doing what assassins do or Isabela not minding at all that her husband was his target. Maybe I should listen to Oghren more closely when he says marriage is for suckers.

"I suppose," Isabela agrees. "I never did like that greasy bastard anyway. Now, don't you think you should introduce us?" She smiles broadly at Rori.

"Indeed," Zevran laughs. "Rori, Alistair, this is Isabela, Queen of the Eastern Seas and the sharpest blade in Llomerryn. And Isabela, you'll no doubt be amused to discover that I am travelling with a Grey Warden. Two to be exact."

"Pleasure to meet you," Rori murmurs, holding out her hand to shake Isabela's. The pirate queen instead smacks a kiss to the back of Rori's hand, causing her to blush a deeper shade of pink once more. The pirate queen clearly leaves her puzzled of how to react. Can't say I'm any wiser than my woman.

“A Grey Warden?” Isabela says, intrigued. Not letting go of Rori's hand, she spins the ginger around once more, raking her eyes over Rori's rather curvy body. "Where did you find her, Zevran? She's cute. Can I borrow her for a while?"

“You are talking to the wrong man, Isabela, my brave pirate queen.” Zevran nods at me and the pirate cares to take notice of me for the first time.

“Ohhh, hello handsome,” she purrs and has her fingers dance across my chest. “Now this gets better and better. Zevran, where do you always find such pretties?"

"I was hired to assassinate them. Alas, I failed."

"Alas, it would have been a shame if you hadn't," Isabela laughs. "So, how about a game of cards and a drink or two? And then... well, one never knows, right? Life is quite an adventure." She motions towards a table in the corner of the taproom but we don't even get to say thank you, but no, thank you... or anything similar when the madam of the house appears next to us.

"Some of Loghain's men have arrived," she mutters under her breath, holding up her hand for
Zevran to drop some more coins into her palm.

"The last room on the left side of the corridor has a trapdoor beneath the rug that leads to the harbour," the woman whispers, pocketing the coins.

"See, that's why you always clean up your mess and make sure the bordello queen is at good terms with you," Zev grins at me. "This way, my dear friends, the rats are deserting the sinking ship!"

"I don't like having you talk about sinking ships, Zev," Isabela sulks as she follows us to the room the madam pointed out to us. "And I don't like you leaving me here when today finally started to get interesting. I was already considering buying another hat and then you came along. Now, why don't you pay me a visit on my ship? We could have a little party, you, your Grey Warden cuties and me."

"Err... I don't know...," Rori says hesitantly but neither Zevran nor I listen to her.

"Oh, playing shy now, aren't you?" Isabela teases. "I will show you some nice tricks, sweetheart...fencing tricks... stop grinning, Zev! You and your perverted imagination!" She smacks the back of the elf's head, and then turns back to Rori and smiles wickedly. "Now, don't tell me you're not just dying know! Your little girl act cannot fool me."

"A real pirate ship?" I ask excitedly. "Oh, I always wanted to know what they look like."

"Awesome! This way!" Isabela takes the lead, dragging us along until she proudly presents her ship to us. "And here she is! The Sirene! Avast, me pretties! Strike your panties and prepare to be boarded!"

Shortly later we find ourselves in the captain's cabin. It is bigger than I imagined with a huge bed, the frame ornated with gold, and enough fluffy pillows for a decent pillow fight. Around a round table stand two divans with red velvet and a comfortable armchair. Isabela produces several shot glasses, a bottle and a set of cards from a small cabinet. From another she pulls something that looks to me like a vase with several pipes attached. Zevran explains it's a narghile for smoking weed.

"Arl Eamon used to smoke a pipe every now and then..." I begin, turning the strange object around in my hands. "It looked nothing like that. How do you use it?"

"Alright, my pretties, let's play Wicked Grace," Isabela grins smugly at all of us. "I deal."

About an hour later the air in the cabin is thick with smoke and I am quite tipsy and high and naked but for my smallclothes. I'd still have my shirt but I gave it to Rori when she lost her last piece of clothing. Swaying lightly although she's sitting, she giggles uncontrollably, with short interruptions by her adorable hiccup. She leans heavily against me, stealing kisses from me whenever we get kicked out of another round of Wicked Grace. That happens quite often as we always lose.

"Now, are we playing cards or something else?" Isabela teases when Rori climbs on my lap, her fingers entangled with my hair as she kisses me deeply, seemingly unaware of our audience.

"Cards?" my fellow Grey Warden, still straddling me, slurs, holding out her glass to Isabela to indicate she's up for more. When Isabela wants to refill her glass, Zevran stops her.

"I think la niña has had enough, Isabela," the elf comments. He has a grin plastered across his face that never fades and his pupils are dilated to a point where his eyes look like a set of pitch black beetles.

"Maker, Zevran, when did you become such a killjoy? You sound like a... parent!" Ignoring the elf, the pirate queen pours more of the golden liquid into Rori's and my glasses. "We're here for some
I know I shouldn't but I down the shot anyway. So does Rori.

"Go easy on them, Isabela. They are young and clueless. He's a chantry boy, she's a noble maiden. They don't play in your league. It's their first love. The very first for both of them, you know what I mean."

Rori takes hold of the bottle and tries to fill her glass once more. Soon there's more booze on the table than in her glass. I stupidly watch how she drops down on her knees to lap the spilled liquid up.

Boy, is she drunk!

Boy, am I drunk!

It occurs to me that I should stop her.

"Oh, how cute!" the pirate squeals. I doubt she means Rori's ungraceful display of ultimate drunkenness. "You think they are ready to broaden their horizons?"

Rori misinterprets my attempts to pull her away from the mess on the table and I find myself sprawled across the divan with an almost naked redhead on top of me.

"I dare say, they broaden it every day. They are rather adventurous," Zevran chuckles.

Rori tugging at my smallclothes, blinks at me stupidly when I try to point out to her we have an audience. She stares at Isabela and Zevran as if she took notice of them for the first time, wondering how they come to be here at all.

"Then I don't see why we shouldn't have a bit of fun together." Isabela trails her fingers teasingly across Rori's cheek, down the side of her neck and across her collarbones. "This card game is getting old anyway. Time for something more exciting to happen."

Rori gawks. I gawk. Is she talking about what I think she is talking about?

The elf wraps his arms around Isabela's waist, pulling her against him. "You want to play, my brave pirate queen, pick on someone your own size."

"Oh come on, Zev, you're not even half my size!" Isabela laughs but she's already pulling his pants down. I cover Rori's eyes with my hand to protect her from seeing what comes into view shortly later.

"You're hurting me, Isabela! And after I freed you from that husband of yours. I would think you would at least be a little thankful." Zevran pouts as he rips Isabela's blouse open. Rori shoves my hand aside and claps both her palms over my eyes when the pirate queen's breasts pop out of her shirt.

"I've been immensely thankful, Zev, and I have made my gratitude quite obvious already."

Rori and I get into a fight about who covers the other one's eyes and fall off the divan in the process. Out of the corner of my eyes I can see how Isabela leads the elf away towards her bed by his manhood.

I really don't know what happens then. I must have fallen asleep on that floor with Rori on top of me. I wake to Rori stirring. The whole room is spinning when I open my eyes so I close them again -
which doesn't make anything better.

Next I am sitting on the divan again with Rori straddling me - again - just this time I don't wear any smallclothes anymore and she doesn't wear my shirt anymore. While I am sucking roughly at her nipples I wonder about what I am actually doing here. I can't get rid of the impression I keep missing something. I so can't remember how I got rid of my last piece of clothing or how I got to make love to my woman in Captain Isabela's cabin.

With her back arched to give me access to her beautiful mounds, Rori slowly rocks her hips against mine. Her eyes half-closed, her head rolling from one side to the other, her mouth o-shaped with those cute mewing noises and soft moans passing her lips, she's completely lost to her pleasure, unaware of anything but her own body and mine connected.

"Rori?" I mutter. My tongue feels strangely heavy and... furry...

"Huh?" she answers, sounding as if she was half asleep. Or awfully drunk. And high. Or all of that at once.

I've already forgotten what I actually wanted to ask her and I guess, it doesn't really matter. She still stares at me, frowning as if she was wondering about something but couldn't really put a finger on it. After a moment she just shrugs, grabs me by my ears and pulls me close for a deep cotton-mouthed kiss, tongues lazily stroking each other.

I grip her hips, taking control over her excruciatingly slow rhythm that's threatening to drive me crazy. I stand with Rori still straddling me... bad idea... the room starts spinning immediately... and next I slam her down on the low table with me on my knees between her legs... that's not where I intended to be... I mean the table, not her legs... I so totally intended to be between her legs... err... blast... I should stop trying to think when it obviously is impossible...

As I am already here and she is already here, I move on with my business as Oghren would say, shattering some glasses in the process... and just fuck her on that table, slamming into her over and over again...

Good thing that all the furniture is fixed to the floor...

Rori clings to me, meeting every thrust as she rocks her hips against mine. Her head has fallen back and she's being really noisy. Can't say that I am any quieter... for a moment I wonder what happened to Zevran and Isabela... but the thought gets blown away when I spiral into a mind numbing climax. Rori collapses against me with her whole weight.

"I love you," I murmur, Rori slurring something in reply that could pass as a very drunken "Luv ya, too."

I only notice Isabela has returned when Rori lifts herself from me. The pirate queen is sitting on the second divan and sips rum from a huge silver goblet. She is completely naked, the candle light giving her dark skin a golden glow. How long has she been there? Has she watched us? I am too high, too drunk, too – oh, I don't even know – to get flustered about this. Rori is swaying slightly. She's so dazed, she stumbles over her own feet and lands in Isabela's lap. The pirate spills her rum all over Rori's breasts, the sticky sweet liquid flows down her belly and between her legs.

“Now, look what you've done,” Isabela scolds, putting the goblet aside. “You've made a complete mess. I will have to clean you.” Thus said, the pirate wraps her arm around Rori's waist to hold her in
place, then bends to lick the sticky liquid from her breasts. Rori is so stunned and shocked, she's unable to react. She just stares; wide-eyed, fascinated and horrified how Isabela circles her tongue around her rosy nipples.

Same with me. I also sit and stare and the only part of my body that is able to react to a woman sucking at my kitten's nipples, is my manhood.

"Mhmm, how tasty," Isabela purrs, swirling her tongue around Rori's soft mounds. Pushing her to lay on the divan, Isabela moves her mouth down across Rori's belly, lapping up every droplet of spilled liquor from her navel. Rori lifts her hands in a weak attempt to stop Isabela, but the pirate has already coaxed her legs apart and presses her mouth at the ginger's womanhood. Rori gasps, clutching at the divan for support as her hips involuntarily rock forward at the pirate's assault.

My manhood twitches in reply to the naughty display. My pride, however, is hurt. Blast it, this is my girl! "Hey, I'm right there, you know," I pout, causing Isabela to lift her head and grin at me.

"I see, and why aren't you right here?" She pats the floor beside her. "Sitting over there all alone doesn't seem to suit you, so why don't you join?"

"Wh-what?" I stammer. I certainly know a billion reasons why I should decline that invitation - I just can't remember a single one at the moment. While my mind is still arguing with itself about the pros and cons, my feet have already carried me across that short distance... okay, okay, I stumble and sway and almost topple over the table... but in the end I drop to my knees right where Isabela pointed me to be.

Now I am here, I have no clue what to do. So I just look foolish until Isabela takes my chin in her hands, pulling me in for a kiss, her tongue teasingly coaxing me to stop squeezing my lips shut but respond to the kiss.

She tastes of Rori.

It's... strange... intoxicating... it's wrong... so wrong...

Oh, fuck that!

It's absolutely hot!

Isabela's hand circles around my erection as she returns to sucking at that hard little nub between Rori's legs. With her free hand the pirate grabs mine and pushes it between her own slightly parted legs.

Oh Maker!

I can feel her slickness against my fingers, her moist velvet heat and the softness of her pubic hair as I begin to fumble around insecurely first until I elicit the first moan from the pirate.

My head gets yanked back when Rori pulls at my hair, scowling at me in disbelief. She's one to complain! I don't have another woman sucking me off... err... okay, I have her jerking me off... Merciful Andraste!...

I grin stupidly and on figuring that won't save me, just kiss my woman forcefully. She bites down on my bottom lip in reply, drawing blood. When I pinch her nipple hard as a retort, she moans into my mouth, melting into the kiss. Next Isabela pulls me away from her and I find myself kissing the pirate queen again before she pushes my head down to Rori's breasts.
With me sucking at her nipples and Isabela returning to her ministration of Rori's womanhood, the petite ginger is writhing at the edge of an overwhelming orgasm. Isabela's hand flexes up and down my shaft, teasingly running her thumb across the sensitive tip she liberatedly denies me my own release as well.

"Your turn to worship the little goddess, chantry boy," Isabela grins, letting go of my throbbing member. Both Rori and I gasp in protest when the pirate queen suddenly stops her assault on us. I don't need a second invitation when Isabela moves to make room for me. I lift Rori's legs onto my shoulders and slam into her with one forceful thrust, almost pushing her off the divan. She cries out in lustful pain, her noisy moans almost drowning my own grunts and groans of pleasure.

The release comes as a violent spasm and carried forward through her whole body. She tightens around me, increasing the friction of her velvet heat until I cannot stand it anymore and erupt inside of her, roaring her name.

I am still gasping for air, holding my beloved in my arms, feeling dizzy with my body on fire from the aftermath of my orgasm, when the pirate queen goes: "Now, wasn't that fun? Time for my reward!"

All Rori still can do is roll her head from side to side and mumble incoherent nonsense, I am so spent I could fall asleep right away, but Isabela revives us with another shot of whiskey and her expert bedroom skills. Or maybe I did sleep. This also could be some kind of dream altogether... I can't really remember...

Somehow I end up between Isabela's legs, showing Rori how to give oral pleasure to a woman and my kitten obediently repeats the ministration I give to the pirate queen.

Has to be a dream...

Isabela has one hand entangled in Rori's hair, pressing her face closer to her womanhood while the younger female is lapping at her...

Oh Maker, my head is spinning....

The pirate queen's breasts are as large and soft as Rori's, with her nipples like hard little pebbles against the velvet texture of my tongue. Isabela's free hand entangles with my hair, she laughs out loud in between her moans of pleasure. Hers are huskier than Rori's, lewd and dirty... Rori's little mewing noises almost sound innocent compared to Isabela's sounds of lust and desire.

This can't be real...

I sit on the divan with two women kneeling in front of me, both licking and sucking at my manhood in turns. All I can do is grin foolishly as I watch, clutching at the backrest for support. I've always thought Rori can really swallow a whole lot of my erection without gagging - that is until Isabela deep throats me and I almost jump right out of my skin at the sensation.

Holy fucking shit!

How we make it to the bed... I have no clue...

How I end up with Isabela riding me while I lap at Rori's womanhood hovering above my face... I can't remember.

The pirate queen is kissing my fellow Warden, both women caressing each others breasts, rolling their nipples between nimble fingers, pinching and tucking. At the same time Isabela sways her hips
against me, slowly sliding up and down my hard length...

Three bodies entangled with each other, stroking, kissing, giving pleasure to each other... gentle bites leaving reddish marks on smooth skin, teeth teasingly tearing at soft flesh... tongues intertwined, lips crushing against each other... the salty taste of sweat combined with the musky scent of a woman's sweet juices... all woven together by a lustful symphony of moans and cries of pleasure... it's almost too much...

And then a blissful silence as sleep embraces me and I snuggle against the softness of two female bodies...

My eyes flutter open again briefly at a sound and a movement next to me.

"Ze-zevran?" I mutter as the elf covers Rori, Isabela and me with a blanket. Then I pass out.

Chapter End Notes

The threesome with Isabela always is somewhat odd in the game.

I mean, it's practically like:

Warden: Hi.
Isabela: Hi.
Warden: Teach me to fight.
Isabela: Lets play cards first.
Warden: Nah, rather lets have sex.
Isabela: Okay.
Alistair: Hey!
Isabela/Warden: Join us!

And happily off they go.

I never could see it happen like that with Roristair. And I was debating on whether it could happen at all. Anyway, hope you enjoyed the alternate scene.

Comments very much welcomed. I'd really like to know what you ppl think.
PookatheCat's very own version of what happens after the threesome.

Maker... I am dying.

My head feels like Wade put it on his anvil, hammering around on it with brutal force. My whole body is sore, muscles tight and aching and I have a foul taste in my mouth next to that swollen, furry and dry thing that I believe is my tongue.

Groaning I open my eyes as much as I dare and squeeze them shut again when bright sunlight pierces them. With much effort I roll to one side, expecting the warm female body next to me to be Rori's. Instead I stare stupidly at a dark skinned, dark haired beauty. She's fast asleep and doesn't even stir when I hurry to escape from her embrace.

Huh?

Panicking I roll away from the woman and out of bed, almost landing on top of Rori who has curled up on the wooden floor with a blanket. It cannot hide that she is as naked as I and the exotic stranger. Merciful Andraste... what has happened?

As getting up proves impossible, I wrap myself around Rori, covering her with as much of my body as possible, while my bleary mind tries to make sense of the situation, of the empty bottles, cards and clothes littering the floor, of some strange object looking like a vase and of Zevran sleeping on one of the two divans in the room that seems to be the cabin of a ship... At least the elf wears his pants. That's somewhat comforting...

Rori is the only thing that seems real in this chaotic mess, so I hold on to her as I try to remember... and then wish I hadn't tried so hard... Oh, Andraste, help me...

The memory comes crushing back at me like a tidal wave. I crane my neck to cast a look at the sleeping pirate queen sprawled across the bed... Oh Maker, I feel so sick... I did... I had... I had sex with another woman! Oh blast!

And that's only the beginning. Not that much later when everybody is up and more or less awake, things get even worse.

Rori, after having been violently sick with Zev holding back her hair while she was bent over that bucket, unsuccessfully tries to put on her archdemon socks. She hasn't said a single word to me, hasn't even looked at me ever since she woke up enough to take in her surroundings and recall last nights events. When I try to help her with the socks she turns away. The way her shoulders tremble I can tell she's crying. It couldn't hurt more if she had stabbed me right in the heart with her dagger. Zevran pats my shoulder sympathetically before he takes over and helps her get dressed. She's muttering protests but doesn't try to fend him off like she has done with me. Turning that dagger in the still bleeding wound now, isn't she?

Then Isabela comes to make things even worse. She's awfully cheerful when my world just seems to
"Why didn't you join us, Zevran? I almost missed you." The pirate queen throws an apple at him that the elf catches easily. The one thrown at me hits my head. I don't even attempt to catch it as I am busy trying to make Rori take notice of me so that I could talk to her. She refuses, though, to even acknowledge I exist. Maker! She must at least give me the chance to explain and apologize! She must!

"You had your hands full with those two, Isabela," the elf remarks dryly.

"Oh, I could have handled one more," Isabela laughs in between noisily munching her apple. Lack of self-confidence certainly is none of Isabela's problems.

"You, yes, I have no doubt about that. Them? no way."

Isabela shrugs. "You have no idea what you missed. They were quite eager students. Especially the cute chantry boy. The ginger, well, she was alright. Cute in every way. But that little templar... mhhmm... quite a natural talent." Then, beaming broadly, she chooses to pull Rori to her feet and take both her hands in hers, trying to dance her around once more. That Rori shakes her off at once doesn't bother the pirate. "My dear, you wouldn't consider leaving Alistair with me?" the pirate queen asks with a seductive smile. "Would you perhaps let me borrow him for a week in the summer? I am sure we can work out a deal..."

"No!" Rori almost jumps in her face. The pirate is so taken by surprise she stumbles backwards. Her retreat, the fact that Rori hardly can stand on her own feet and Zevran holding her back, saves Isabela from having her eyes scratched out.

"Whoa! Someone's being unreasonably jealous this morning," the Rivaini comments when Rori pulls free from Zevran's grasp and storms out of the cabin, toppling over her own feet and up the stairs. "Well, you aren't her possession, right? What do you say?"

"Huh? Err... no?" I am too busy feeling miserable and trying to make sense of Rori's behaviour, I hardly listen to the pirate babbling something about wet frocks. As if I cared about wet frocks right now! I've really got other things to worry about!

"Just give her some time and space, Alistair, my friend." The elf holds me back and hands a mug of coffee to me when I start to go after Rori. "She needs to figure this out for herself."

"Figure this out? What... what do you mean?" I squeak, panicking at the thought of what Rori could possible have to make up her mind about. She won't... she won't break up with me because... Merciful Andraste! I am so dizzy, my knees give way and If not for Zevran helping me to sit down, I'd have dropped down like a dead man where I stood.

I sit on the divan, my head is killing me and I am just a mess. Zevran is patting my back and listens to me telling him over and over again what a stupid inconsiderate idiot I am. Maker's Breath! I slept with another woman right in front of Rori... sure, she took part... but... that doesn't make it any better, does it? And I can't even remember half of what has happened. A horrible thought courses my mind... Andraste's flaming sword... Zevran was there, too!

"Did you... did you touch her?" I ask, sounding hollow. I do not dare to look at the elf. I am afraid of what I could see in his eyes. The mere thought of him and Rori together is excruciating. Her being with another woman... it isn't anything I feel especially thrilled about... well, I do feel thrilled but not like that... oh blast, I wish I could make sense of this. Her with a woman, that's something I think I can handle... Her with another man. I see red. I'd gladly kill that bastard with my bare hands! No
wonder Rori is mad at me.

"You really think I would take advantage of a drunken teenage girl who doesn't know what she's doing?" Zevran seldom sounds offended no matter what insult you throw at him. Now he does. Seriously.

"Sorry," I mutter. This seems to be the day when I trample around on other people's emotions.

"It's alright," the elf says amiably, patting my arm. "Most people at least once in their lives experience that moment when they wake up after a drunken night and find they've done something stupid."

"No kidding." I'm experiencing that moment right now.

"I once woke next to three Qunari and a bear...," the elf goes on.

"A... bear?"

"A dancing bear. My ass was so sore..." That's the moment when I hastily flee from the cabin. I should be going after Rori anyway to at least make sure she doesn't fall over the railing. "Alas, I take it you don't want to hear that story in detail," the chuckling elf calls after me.

I find Rori sitting on a heap of hawsers on deck of Isabela's ship. She has a dirty blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She's looking so small, so vulnerable and so miserable, it makes my heart bleed. I have to force my legs to cross the distance and make myself sit down beside of her.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, my voice not sounding like my own. No wonder when I don't feel much like myself right now.

It takes her a while and I already fear she's going to ignore me again, but then she looks up at me with a shy smile. Her eyes are puffed and red. "There's nothing you have to be sorry for," she whispers hoarsely. "We both participated in... that."

"But... you are mad at me?"

"No!" she cries. "Yes..." She hides her face in her hands, then in utter frustration pulls at her hair. "Oh Maker!" She jumps to her feet, throwing off the blanket, and begins to pace. "I shouldn't be mad at you. I shouldn't be jealous..." She wrings her hands and stomps her feet. She so looks like a mad little imp, it almost makes me laugh at how cute she is upset about herself. "It feels like I betrayed you and... as if I was betrayed by you... I know you did nothing wrong considering the... circumstances. But I can't help it... it hurts..." Rori places her hands over her heart. "In here."

"I... I think I understand." I wish I had never met that pirate. I won't deny it was... exciting, hot... just wow! But now... now it's just wrong. If I could undo it, I would. This is so not worth it. "I feel so guilty."

"Me, too." Rori slumps back down next to me and I wrap the blanket around her again. She still avoids looking at me but stares at her hands, kneading her fingers nervously. "Did you..." she finally blurts out, her voice fading when she struggles to find the right words. "Was it... was she... did you enjoy it with her... more than you do with me?"

Oh Maker! She is so timid, her voice so small I can hardly hear her over the sound of the wind and the sea. When she looks at me briefly her eyes are wide, sad and frightened and she casts them down quickly again, blinking frantically to hold back the tears.
"No! No, Rori, never... It was... different. I love you... I... oh Maker!" How can she even think I would... Okay, forget that. I do see where that thought comes from. If it had been her and Zevran, the skilled womanizer, I'd be as insecure as she is now. I haven't yet forgotten how worried I was about my own inexperience when we had just come together. How I wondered if she preferred a more adept lover. "Can you ever... forgive me?"

Finally she faces me, taking her hands in mine. "Alistair, this is not your fault. Not anymore than it is mine... I'm just confused... and stupidly jealous... Blaming you is wrong. I shouldn't have treated you so badly... Please forgive me... I just don't feel like myself right now... This is so... alien." She leans against me and I wrap my arms around her. I am so utterly relieved I almost forget how awful and miserable I feel.

"It's alright. I know what you mean." Confused, alien, yes, that's a rather apt description of my own state of mind.

"I will never get drunk again," Rori sighs, snuggling closer to me as she nuzzles my neck. "You need a bath," she observes. "I need one, too. Phew... I stink."

"You're certainly right about that."

"Charming!" Laughing, Rori punches my arm, then ruffles my hair. Her smile is full of warm affection when she beams at me, but fades all too quickly back into that insecurity she has developed around me after last night. Isabela landed quite a blow. Rori has to feel rather insufficient. Really, that's usually my part. Thinking she's more than I deserve, believing her to be too good for me.

"Sooo," she says meekly, biting her lips as she casts a shy look at me. "You don't want to be borrowed by that pirate this summer?"

"Ahh, well..." I can't help the lopsided grin that appears on my face. "Not that the idea of being borrowed isn't terribly fascinating... you, know, breasts, firm buttocks, wet frocks..." The way Rori glares at me she's considering to have me keelhauled. So much for my attempt to make her laugh.

"Let's not forget the darkspawn. There may not be a week in the summer. Or any summer."

"You go on like that and the darkspawn are the last thing you should be worried about, boy," Rori growls. She sounds more like a frightened kitten than like a roaring lioness, though. "Your lack of summers will not be due to them."

"Too bad," I sigh and really manage to sound utterly devastated. "I was already picturing you and me sailing into the sunset, the cool breeze caressing our heated skin..."

She punches my arm again, harder this time. "You're such a... silly tease of a man! And I love you. The Maker only knows why!"

"Because of my irresistible charm, my rugged handsomeness and my amazing bedroom skills?"

"Because all of that and so much more," she admits with a sad smile.

"Hey, kitten." I lift her chin so that she has to look at me with her blue blue eyes. "You alone reside in my heart." I take her small hand and press it to my chest. "For always and forever." I bite my tongue in time before I can add something really dramatic like: Only death can tear us apart. I doubt that would sit well with her at the moment. Not when she's reduced to such a mess.

"Oh Maker! Are you two done now?" Isabela's voice sounds from behind us.

"Isabela!" Zevran scolds her.
"What? I've never been much into tearjerkers."
Chapter Notes

Spoiler from the novel Asunder.
For the rest of the day I feel awkward. Okay, yes, I feel awkward most of the time, but this is more awkward than usual. It's extraordinarily awkward.

Last nights events still haunt both of us. No matter what Isabela says, for me it's not that easy to just see the fun side of it. Perhaps one could if there weren't any feelings involved, but until last night I never thought I'd ever have sex with anybody I do not love.
Fine... I'd lie if I said I couldn't even imagine it. I imagine quite a lot of things... uhm... dirty things, too... although my head every time feels as if I got a temperature as I blush violently about my own depravity... but thinking about something and doing it, there's quite a difference.

And now, I've done it. I am so utterly lost and confused; I didn't even have time yet to become flustered about Zevran seeing me naked. And seeing Rori naked. And raste's flaming sword! What if he hasn't only seen us unclothed but also... doing... it... that...

If I didn't have the worst headache of my life, worse still than after trying to defeat Gregor, worse than after partying with Varric Tethras.... I'd want a drink now... but the mere thought makes me feel sicker than I already do, so I guess I have to endure my suffering without any more alcohol.

Rori behaves strangely around me and I around her. What came so natural now is twisted with insecurity, hurt feelings and self-contempt. Rori tries so hard to be her usual self, she appears like a caricature of herself. Noticing she does, she becomes more and more silent, retreating into herself and shutting me out. That pushes me forward until I find myself behaving as strangely as she did before and in the end we both hardly talk to each other. Usually we would just laugh it off at some point. But today it just won't work. When we are forced to interact, we apologize to each other about almost everything. I am really glad when we finally get to use the bathhouse after a long day of running errands and solving problems for the city guard and remeeting with Ignacio from the Crows.

I sit in a private cabin in my tub all alone, pushing the wooden soap dish and the brush around on the water like little ships while I try not to think about my recent encounter with two women. It doesn't work. Somehow I thought the hot water would wash off all the awkwardness and guilt but it doesn't. I begin to worry that I could have done serious damage to Rori's and my relationship. Really, how stupid have I been? Instead of joining them, I should have stopped Isabela and dragged Rori away from the pirate for her own sake. No use, though, to fret about this now. I really should ask Wynne if there's something like time-changing-magic. That really would come in handy sometimes...

With the city being cramped with refugees and Howe's men all out and about trying to hunt us down, Denerim isn't the safest place for us at the moment. Somehow rumour has spread that we are here and the whole city is like a hornets' nest, noisily and angrily buzzing, with soldiers turning everything upside down. Too bad we do not know any rat runs and that the price on our heads by now is so high, some people would sell their own granny for that money. That's the reason why my sword is in reach, lying across the wooden tub. Zevran is out there with Leliana, keeping watch and we have earned some big favours with the city guard, but I would rather be able to defend myself anyway.

As it is, Rori could be forced to reconsider Isabela's offer to shipus to Gwaren. I'm really not looking forward to that. I'd rather be as far away as possible from that pirate. She said I would enjoy being borrowed... I don't doubt that... on a physical level. And that's something that really scares and confuses me. How can something feel so good and yet so awful at the same time?

I hear Rori splashing around in her tub in the cabin next to mine. It's only a screen separating us. It's hard to ignore her when every sound she makes has me prick up my ears. She's trying to keep it low but I still can hear her sob. Then she mutters to herself but I cannot make out what she's saying. She sounds angry, though, and the noisy splashing indicates she's either kicking around in her tub or hitting the surface of the water. She snorts several times at her own rant, having it almost appear as if she's having a discussion with herself. I hardly dare to breathe anymore, leaning closer to the screen to find out more.

Silence.

Not a single sound. Not even the splashing of water. I wait. Still nothing. What is she doing? She cannot have left without me noticing. Did she fall unconscious? Has she slipped under water? Why
doesn't she say anything? Worried out of my mind and not able to endure this tension anymore, I bend over the rim of my tub far enough to pull the screen aside...

...and get hit straight in the face by a dripping wet sponge.

Rori squeals in delight while I still sputter and look stupid.

"Little minx!" I laugh, wiping the foam from my face. She must have known I was eavesdropping and prepared a trap for me.

That's what I get for being in love with a sneaky rogue!

I pick up the sponge to throw it back at her but she dives in her tub and the sponge hits the wall with a wet sucking sound.

"You missed," she grins when she surfaces again. While still wiping the foam from her eyes, she sticks her tongue out at me.

"Yes, I did miss you," I smile. My heart does funny things at the sight of that dripping wet, broadly beaming ginger with that silly heap of foam sitting on top of her head like a droll hat.

Maker, how I love her!

I am so relieved she's back with me.

I wouldn't trade her for any guilty pleasures.

After we've invited ourselves to Arl Eamon's city estate since the city is so crowded with refugees that they already camp in the streets, we spend a rather comfortable night. Especially comfortable for me as I get to spend it with Rori. Something I wouldn't have expected when I woke in the morning. Holy Maker, she even feeds me cheese while we sit together in front of the bed with the blankets covering the floor as we have our own little indoor picnic in front of the fireplace. If someone had asked me this morning, cheese would have been the last thing I'd have thought to be fed by her.

We horse around a lot, Rori starting it all with trying to throw small pieces of cheese into my mouth. I perform a pretty good imitation of Sten and Zevran, having Rori laugh herself to tears. We pull faces at each other, revive the Grey Warden doll and the archdemon sock for another epic battle, have a pillow fight and end up making love to each other in a completely boring way, not even once switching the position and with a whole lot of tenderness. I even drift off to sleep and it's totally comfortable... at least for me. Probably not that much for Rori as I am on top with my whole weight pressing her down...

"DARKSPAWN!"

With a startled cry I jump out of bed, hobbling around in the darkness, stepping on plates and toppling over Rori's boots. Crawling around on the floor, I feel for my sword while I try to push my still half asleep body and mind into battle mode... something's not quite right here, though... And why in the name of the Maker is Rori laughing so hard?

Tell you something, when you are pleasantly dozing and everything is warm and cozy and soft, then the last thing you expect is your woman yelling into your ear at the top of her voice...

"That was... a false alarm?" I ask stupidly. "Maker! Woman! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"
"Sorry, Alistair, really I'm sorry. I couldn't wake you... poked you, pinched your nose, pulled at your earlobes but you just kept snoring." Rori laughs, not sounding sorry at all.

I say nothing. Just lift myself off the floor in a dangerously calm manner. Then I stroll back to the bed, pretending to be relaxed and then I... tackle her!

"NO!" she squeaks when I mercilessly tickle her. "Mercy!" She squirms and kicks... and accidentally sends a full force blow to my head...

When I drift back to consciousness I have my head resting in Rori's lap and she's holding a cool moist cloth to my forehead. She's humming softly, gently caressing the side of my face with the back of her hand. Mhmm, getting knocked out by her is not that bad after all...

"Sorry," she whispers when I open my eyes after some more time pretending I was still out so I could enjoy her tenderness some longer.

"So that's your way of mind numbing a man?" I tease.

"I could think of another," she mumbles, leaning closer to kiss me.

What can I say? We end up making love to each other again.

And then we sleep like spoons.

This moment I couldn't be any happier. And I finally feel like myself again.

A few days later everything is like it has been before... or I'm just fooling myself? I don't know. We don't talk about the incident with the pirate anymore. Not now. Sure, I am dying to ask Rori what it was like for her to be with a woman but I don't dare. Sometimes I catch her looking at me when she thinks I don't notice, and I see the sadness in her eyes next to that warm affection she has reserved for me alone. I guess, we both are a bit more disenchanted now.

Love for me was always like in the epic love stories. It was about everlasting devotion, about adoration and admiration. It was something pure and holy... Reality is different, though. All those ideals, they turned out not to work for me. Once I accepted that, it's not been a bad thing, because I still adore and admire my beloved fellow Warden, but I can also see her flaws - and that makes me love her even more. I just hope she can cope with my flaws, too.

We've made it out of Denerim with the help of the city guards and are now headed south towards the Brecilian Forest as that's where we think we could perhaps find some Dalish. At least Flemeth said that's where they would be. But the Brecilian Forest is huge and wild, shrouded in many myths and legends.

The Dalish travel around with their clans, that much we know. Usually they do not want to be found by humans and thus there's no signs on the road saying 'Dalish Camp - 5 Miles ->'. And we all feel reluctant to run aimlessly through the forest in the hope of stumbling across some Dalish.

"If this was the coastlands, I'd find them... perhaps... given a few months time," Rori sighs as we sit around the campfire somewhere at the borders of the huge dark forest. She turns a snowdrop around between her fingers, one of the first that poke their heads out of the snow. It's almost a shame but I had to pluck it for her just because I knew it would make her smile. "Fergus and I, we were out and about almost all summer long. Father loved hunting parties. Not the fancy types where two dozen lords and ladies on horses chase a poor fox across the countryside. We had camps much like ours now and tracked the game. It was all like a big adventure."
"Could you track the Dalish?" I ask, examining my shirt while I lazily stir the soup in the pot. It's more like a broth actually and we threw everything eatable or almost eatable we could find into it. I am really glad about the first signs of spring. It should be easier to find something to eat soon.

"I very much doubt I'd even notice a track," she says thoughtfully. "I am far from being a ranger. A guide would be something." She chews at her bottom lip, while turning the problem around in her mind. I got a totally different problem at hand. And I do know who can fix it.

"Wynne?" I whine, doing my best to sound utterly helpless as I hold up the rim of my shirt to make my problem obvious to anybody who cares to look my direction.

"Yes, Alistair?" The granny mage puts down her book and smiles amiably at me.

"My shirt has a hole in it." I really wish Rori would be a little more careful with my shirts when passion overwhelms her... on a second thought... no... her tearing my clothes off me is worth all the times I sit there with the tip of my tongue stuck out of the corner of my mouth, whilst I squint and try to thread the yarn through that blasted tiny needle eye.

"I see," Wynne observes. "And?"

"Can you mend it?" I give her my best puppy-dog-eye glance.

"Can't you mend your own clothes?" she asks, frowning. "Why do I have to do it?"

"Sometimes I pick up too much fabric and it ends up all puckered and the entire garment hangs wrong afterward." The very shirt I am wearing does show several examples of my misfortune when it comes to mending my clothes. "And you're... you know, grandmotherly. Grandmothers do that sort of thing, don't they?" At least I like to imagine it that way. My own experience with grandmothers is rather limited. "Darning socks and whatnot. You don't want me to have to fight darkspawn in a shirt with a hole, do you? It might get bigger. I might catch a cold."

"Oh, all right," Wynne sighs. "I'll mend your shirt."

Beaming at her, I immediately slip out of the shirt and hand it to her, wrapping myself in a blanket instead. "Ooh! And while you're at it, the elbows kind of need patching too..."

"Careful, young man, or puckered garments may be the least of your problems," Wynne threatens with a needle already stuck between her lips as she chooses yarn from a little box. I do my best to put all my boyish charm into my smile and watch Wynne melt. That is until Rori comes along.

"Ohhh, you mend Alistair's shirt? Can you darn my socks, too? There's a hole... err... two holes..." She pulls off her boots and wiggles both her big toes that are sticking out of the holes in her rainbow coloured striped archdemon socks.

"Can't you darn your own socks, young lady?" Wynne asks unnerved.

"No? Nan or one of the maids always did that for me..."

Five minutes later both Rori and I are armed with needles and obediently follow Wynne's instructions.

"I already had her wrapped around my little finger," I growl at Rori. She sucks at her finger where she stung herself, glaring at me in return. We both try to appear utterly miserable but Wynne stays unimpressed. She sips her wine as she watches us and seems unwilling to end our suffering.
"You know, of all the mages I've met you have to be the first one I can honestly say I've really liked," I start a new attempt to butter the granny up. I mean it, though. Wynne has changed my point of view when it comes to mages.

"Why thank you, Alistair. I am quite touched. I like you, too, Alistair. I imagine my son would have grown up to be someone like you." She smiles, looking much like an old cat. "But I still won't mend your shirt. You do have to learn how to do it properly. Rori, my dear, don't pick your eyes out with that needle. That sock is not your enemy."

"It's the archdemon sock," Rori mutters, stabbing violently at the helpless garment. "It has devoured the Grey Warden doll twice."

"Your son?" I inquire. "I thought you said you were never married?" I've never heard Wynne talk about a son. It seems odd she wouldn't at least have mentioned him.

"That's true. I never have been." Wynne sounds a little sad I think, melancholic.

"I... oh. Then this wasn't... before you joined the circle?" I am a little confused now. As far as I know templars are supposed to make sure mages behave. It doesn't always work, though. Jowan and Lily are the worst example of how much it doesn't work. The Chantry and the templars often seem to forget that mages are humans after all. And they did not choose this life. All those rules, they were made for a reason... but I am beginning to wonder, if they are too strict.

"I joined the Circle at the age of nine. So no," Wynne says. "Do you still like me?"

"Err... yes? Why wouldn't I?" All I can think about is how similar our fates have been. She's been locked away in that tower ever since she was a child and if not for Duncan I'd have been locked away in the templar order for the rest of my life.

"Good. It appears you got away from the Chantry just in time." The granny mage returns to her book - after she has thoroughly scolded Rori for all the knots in her yarn and the mighty big mess she has made of the miserable archdemon sock. Rori just grins sheepishly - and then triumphantly when Wynne finally takes her socks from her to repair the damage.

"What happened to your son?" I blurt out after a while.

"I honestly don't know, Alistair," Wynne sighs, handing one sock back to Rori. "You could wash that one for a change, young lady. You've picked up Alistair's horrendous habits."

"They always freeze after washing," Rori complains. "I can't dry them with magic." She puts the sock back on despite Wynne's nose wrinkle. "Why don't you know about your son?" she asks.

Sighing Wynne drops her hands to her lap, staring at the second colourful sock as if it was the most interesting thing in the world. "He was... taken from me," she finally admits. "Such births are seldom, as there are ways to prevent it, but it does happen. Any child born to a Circle mage belongs to the Chantry."

"I... didn't know. I'm sorry." I feel like a complete idiot now for having pulled that memory to the surface. Rori gets up to give Wynne a hug.

"It's all right. It was a long time ago. A very long time ago." The old mage smiles sadly at us. She doesn't sound as if it is alright. Not at all.

"Couldn't you do something about it?" It's so cruel to take a baby away from his mother, a mother who would have loved him, cared for him... My mother gave me away because she thought it would
be better for me... For the first time I try to understand how she must have felt about leaving me behind.

"Do what? I was weak from the birthing process and there were... no, there was nothing I could do."

"What about his father?" Rori asks. She's as shocked as I am. This is... wrong, isn't it? Sure, the tower doesn't look much like a place for a baby... and there's the danger of mages turning into abominations... can a baby or a toddler be possessed if they hadn't yet developed their magical talents? We've met a possessed cat... so could a demon be a danger to any creature? I think I can see why the babies would be taken away... it is still cruel... Isn't there any other solution? The Grand Cleric and my Knight-Commander would disagree. They'd have me scrub all the pots in Aeonar for the rest of my life just for my subversive thoughts.

"He was a templar. There was nothing he would have done. Nothing he could have done." Wynne hands the second sock back to Rori. "Are you shocked now?"

"No," Rori replies quickly. She looks thoughtful when she puts her sock back on.

"Do you think about him?" I ask softly.

"All the time," Wynne replies in a hardly audible voice. It's heartbreaking. "Now, give me your shirt, young man," the mage adds quickly, trying to sound resolute.

Wynne and her lost son occupy my thoughts for the rest of the evening. Her fate touches me deep inside. That she isn't angry at those who hurt her so much, I can hardly understand it. I turn the problem round and round in my head to find a solution but there is none. It's probably quite arrogant to even believe someone like I could make a difference...

"You could make a difference, you know," Rori whispers to me in the darkness of our tent. She startles me out of my gloomy thoughts that have been running in circles for hours now.

"Who? Me?" I ask stupidly. "What could I possibly do? Scold Greagoir and Cullen next time we visit the tower? Bribe them with cookies like Sten did with Caroll?"

"Kings can change things," she insists.

"I am no king." Maker! We're not talking about that subject again, are we?

"But you could become one some day. And then you would have the power to change the rules."

"Rori, this is a Chantry competence. I couldn't mess around with that even if I was king."

She sits up, excitedly clapping her hands once. "Of course you could! It's a delicate issue, I admit. Father always said a ruler has to be considerate, thoughtful, cunning and brave."

"I'm not even half of that. Certainly not cunning," I mutter but Rori doesn't really listen to me.

"There's times and matters for big reforms and times and matters that ask for a careful approach," she explains patiently, every inch her father's daughter. "You probably couldn't force them to accept big changes. But you could start with small ones and at some point small changes add to a bigger one."

"You have seen the tower, you know how they live, locked in and guarded like criminals..."

"Oh, whoa, what happened to my obedient little templar? You sound like a keen rebel," Rori teases.

"I am neither overly obedient nor am I little," I sulk. "I just... it's so unfair."
"A ruler has to aim for making the lives of all his subjects better. But he also has to realize he cannot make everybody happy all the time."

"Thanks for the lecture, Bryce," I sigh, quickly holding my hands up in defence when she swats at me. "HEY! Hitting the king certainly wasn't part of your father's ruling agenda!"

"That's what the sparring ground was for," Rori laughs. She speaks with great fondness and a hint of sadness of her father but the mere memory doesn't make her break into tears anymore. "Although it never worked much with Maric, he was a better swordsman than my father."

I am afraid Rori with her nasty tricks and below-the-belt-moves could kick my ass into agreeing to anything she got into her mind.

"My father did that with our alienage in Highever, small changes, I mean," she goes on, not letting herself getting distracted from that topic. She even pushes my hand away when I sneak it under her shirt that is actually mine. "He declared the ius primae noctis void..."

"The what?"

"The right of a noble man to sleep with another man's bride right after the marriage and before the husband does. Most banns would never try that with their human subjects. But with elves, it's a difference. You remember what Darrian Tabris told about his own marriage and Vaughan Kendells?"

"Sure I do. Didn't do much to improve my opinion about Vaughan," I mutter, trying once more to coax Rori into letting me make love to her instead of receiving a lecture in good governance. She's on a mission, though.

"Alistair! Be a good boy and behave yourself!"

"You sound like when you talk to Barkley," I pout.

"And like Barkley you will get a reward," she laughs, taking my hands in both of hers to stop me from fondling her breasts. Sighing, I accept my fate. "Anyway, after the ius primae noctis was declared void in Highever, Father made sure the other banns and arls owing him loyalty followed suit. Then he went and raised the salary of elven servants. He also abated the higher rent for elven farmers. They still earned less than humans and the raise was more symbolic than it helped erase their poverty... but it was a start, you know."

"It's still unfair, isn't it? Why didn't he treat them as equals?"

"Because the humans wouldn't have accepted that. For many, elves are lesser beings. They are cheap workers. You push a huge reform down people's throats and you'd have to deal with riots and pogroms."

"So in case we end this Blight before it devours all of Ferelden and in case we survive and in case I become king and still got something to rule over left, I could try and make things better for the mages," I quickly summarize before Rori can carry on with her lecture.

"Exactly."

"So, you're done now?" I ask hopefully as she lets go of my hands and leans in to place a soft kiss on my lips. "Then where's my reward? And can I choose what I get?"

"So impatient, your Highness?" she teases, her voice a seductive purr as she crawls on my lap.
"What do you want?"

"Err... could you try to... put it into your mouth...,"] I stammer, already blushing deep crimson. "]... real deep... like... you know, swallow it... err... like Isa...?" I bite my tongue before the name can slip but it's already too late. Why, oh why can't I ever think before I speak? That can't be that hard, can it? But no! I have to go and put my foot right in my mouth! I wince and duck my head, waiting for the storm. "So-sorry...?"

Dead silence.

"Rori?" I ask timidly.

"Alistair," she finally coos in a very very soft voice, "are you sure you want my teeth anywhere near your manhood right now?"

"No?" I croak as I begin to sweat.

"A very wise decision, your Highness."

Oh, Andraste, help me...
I stand outside Leliana's tent in no more than my smallclothes and have an argument with Rori who is inside Leliana's tent - with Leliana. And Schmooples, that lucky bastard. With the lantern the bard has lit, I can clearly see both Leliana's and Rori's silhouettes. They both have their arms crossed in front of their chests. Blast! Seems I will be having this argument for a while longer. It's spring but it's still freezing cold at night and I am already hobbling around on one foot, then on the other to avoid standing in the icy mud.

"Oh, come on, Rori, you can't be that mad at me for this... the name just... slipped... I didn't think of her at all..." I say desperately and with clattering teeth.

"Am I missing something?" Leliana mutters. "I am missing something, right?"

"You asked me to do what she did! How can you not have thought of her then?" Rori snaps.

It wouldn't be so bad if she was only angry. She's been mad at me before. It took me some time but I have learnt how to have a proper argument with her. She hisses and snarls, I snarl... she throws her boot or a book at me - I found out better not to return that favour -... and with a bit of luck, I dodge or catch it... she calls me a jerk, I call her a nuisance... and in the end we make up with steaming hot sex. But now she sounds hurt, close to tears actually.

"I am missing something," Leliana sighs. "What a masterspy!"

"Yes... no! I did not think about her," I try to talk myself out of the mess I created. "I pictured you... doing what she... Oh Maker! Rori, really, I've apologized a thousand times for sleeping with that woman..."

Leliana pokes her head out of the tent. "Alistair! You did WHAT!?"

Oh blast! She didn't know? I would have expected Zevran to break the news to all of our companions. Seems he didn't. The lack of teasing actually should have told me so. But I was too busy with Rori and myself to notice. My face is burning, my whole head is so hot and red, you could probably fry an egg on my cheeks.

"Leliana, really, I was drunk and high... oh, Maker! Rori... please... I thought we were through with this... all the times we said sorry... you apologized a thousand times for sleeping with the very same woman..."

Leliana's head disappears inside the tent again. "Rori! You did WHAT!? I didn't know you are into women."

"I am NOT into women!" Rori declares forcefully. "Or... am I?" she - after a short pause - asks meekly and utterly confused. "I was as drunk and high as Alistair... this wasn't really planned. It just happened!"

"You had both sex with another woman? The same woman? At the same time?" Leliana squeaks. "Maker's Breath! One cannot leave you alone. Not even for five minutes!"

"Leliana!" both Rori and I exclaim.

"Hey, this is my tent. You go and have your argument elsewhere and you won't have to bother with me!"
"Rori, please, I thought we made up about this already. All the things that happened on that ship, I thought we got over it." I really thought we'd talked this through... err... okay, we didn't talk about it that much... still, she seemed fine... Oh! Women! Everytime I believe to have figured them out, they do something completely womenly I'd never have expected. It's utterly frustrating. Is there anybody out there who truly understands them?

"That was before you said her name when in bed with me!" Rori hisses.

"Alistair!" Leliana gasps. "How could you!" If I didn't already feel like a complete asshole, I'd get there right now. "You can stay the night here, honey," the bard coos at my ginger.

"I did not say her name," I mutter. "Not like that... I... And teaming up against me is not fair! That... that was not what I meant... I only wanted Rori to try something Isa... she did..."

"This doesn't make it any better!" Rori snaps.

"Not at all," Leliana agrees. "Quite the contrary actually."

"And you said her name again!"

"We are talking about her!" I cry in ultimative exasperation.

Okay, I'm heading nowhere this way. I can either go back to our tent and spend the night alone there, hoping Rori will have calmed down tomorrow. Or I need a new approach to convince her to forgive me and my stupid lapse...

"Rori, please, what do I have to do? Do you want me begging on my knees. Fine. I'm kneeling down now."

Rori's and Leliana's silhouettes still show two females with their arms crossed in front of their chests. Not good.

"I am kneeling out here in the cold cold mud and I feel miserable, ashamed and utterly devastated... and I am so so so sorry," I continue.

I can hear Rori sigh. She rakes her fingers through her hair and begins banging her head against Leliana's shoulder.

"It has begun to rain, by the way," I remark. "It's raining buckets of icy water." Of course they know that. The rain is drumming down on the tarpaulin of the tent. But it certainly won't hurt to point out I am outside in that icy rainstorm. Even the nug is more comfortable than I am.

"Stay strong," the bard advises when Rori begins to wriggle about.

"And now the begging..." I do hope Rori will give in but she's merciless, especially with Leliana as her backup. I wait for a moment, but Leliana has taken both Rori's hands for reassurance and my hope fails. "You're really going to make me beg, aren’t you?" I sigh. "Fine, I beg." Pause. These heartless women really know no mercy. "Roooori!!" I wail. It obviously sounds heartbreakingly desperate because Barkley joins in, howling with me. "Please, please forgive me... before I catch a cold and die of pneumonia all alone and heartbroken! I already can't feel my toes anymore. And I am soaked... the little I wear is soaked. And my hair... dripping wet..."

"Don't give in," Leliana says sternly when Rori begins to giggle, trying unsuccessfully to bite it back. "A bit of suffering will do him good."
"I don't know... he really sounds sorry..." Rori mumbles.

"No way. He has to learn this the hard way. Men don't learn anything at all if not the hard way," Leliana lectures my woman.

"You are a heartless woman, Leliana! Didn't they teach you any mercy in the Chantry?" I pout.

"Only for those who deserve it," the bard shoots back.

If this was Leliana's decision, I could kneel out here all night long. "Rori, I did not mean to hurt you and I am sorry I did. It was inconsiderate and mean and... There's a stone right beneath my left knee and it's poking me nastily... I only want to have mentioned that I am suffering a great deal right now."

"It is cold outside... and wet," Rori points out to the bard, slowly reconsidering her unforgiving attitude.

"The little templar really does like to play with others, doesn't he?" Leliana comments and it doesn't sound friendly or girlish at all. "Here's a piece of advice for you, darling, you better make sure he dearly regrets it so that he never gets the idea to cheat on you again!"

"He did not cheat... not really. And it wasn't his fault!" Rori unexpectedly defends me before I can mumble a feeble excuse. "I was involved, too. Actually, I got it started... somehow... we were really drunk and... Oh, I don't know!"

While Rori tries to explain to Leliana what we both still don't understand, I try to find another way to express how utterly sorry I am, as kneeling and begging doesn't help. It involves my faithful Grey Warden doll as I don't dare to poke my own head into Leliana's tent... and a thick slice of cheese... now, don't say, cheese isn't romantic! It's not as pretty as a flower and this piece is rather smelly. But I have cut it into a heart shape! Not completely symmetrically, I admit, because I cut it in a hurry. But one gets what it's meant to be.

So, the faithful Grey Warden doll takes the cheese in its hands and fearlessly enters the lioness' den, bowing to my lady as it presents her my gift.

"What is that?" Leliana asks. "Cheese? He makes a doll give you cheese? That's his way to say sorry?"

But Rori is not listening to the bard anymore. She is already laughing herself to tears as she takes the cheese-heart from the doll. Then she's out of the tent and throws her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly. "Oh Alistair!" she gasps, showering my face with kisses. "Apology accepted. I'm sorry for being such a bitch. Oh, you are so cold! Hurry, we have to get you out of the rain."

Shortly later I am back in our tent and Rori makes sure I get warm again after standing outside in the chill of the night in no more than my by now muddy and completely soaked smallclothes for such a long time. First she gets me out of the wet garment and tucks me under a blanket, joining me soon afterwards, her warm body pressed against the icicle I've turned into. Then she massages and rubs my whole body thoroughly... and when I say my whole body, I mean it.

But the best part, the very best part of making up with Rori this night is, when I lie snuggled against her and she tells me a story her mother used to tell her in cold, dark nights when she was small. It's about three piglets and a wolf and although I already know the story, it's incredibly cute to listen to Rori deepen her voice to a still girlish growl when she intones the big bad wolf. Her piglets are quite a noisy, squealing bunch and to top it all, she forms her hands to have shadow figures appear on the
tarpaulin of our tent, mimicking her story.

I feel so loved. And sheltered. She even lets me have most of the cheese-heart. I really don't deserve this. I don't deserve her. Especially not tonight. Over and over again I am at awe at how beautiful and ravishing she is. I can hear the sadness in her voice, sometimes it fades and there's a pause longer than necessary. The memory of her mother, as dear and precious as it is, has to hurt her deeply. And yet she shares this with me and allows me to become part of her life, past and present and future. Nobody has ever done this for me. Not like Rori has.

She's already fast asleep snuggled in between me and the dog. I hold her in my arms, listening to her soft breathing, Barkley's snoring and the sound of the rain drumming down on the tarpaulin. I've been in the Chantry for too long as to not make a habit of praying every night before I go to sleep... although Rori makes me forget about it sometimes when she exhausts me so much during our lovemaking that I doze off with no more on my mind than a big fat WOW... anyway, when I'm not completely mind numbed, I act like a good boy and say my prayers... although I have to admit, I'm not very good at it and I hated those times when it was my turn to say my prayers out loud in front of all the other brothers and sisters... it always ended with me having to scrub pots in the kitchen for weeks... I still don't know what is wrong with thanking the Maker for the invention of cheese... but this is not about cheese. It's about Rori. Most of my prayers are dedicated to her. Actually... all of them. Ever since I first met her.

"Oh Maker, first let me say: I'm really sorry for having dusted the grand cleric's formal robes with itching powder...," I mutter to the darkness, wishing I had Leliana's faith. It would make a whole lot of things easier, I imagine. "I know, that was a while ago and I shouldn't have done it at all but... I thought, I should mention it... okay, yes, I am going to ask for a favour. It's pretty obvious, isn't it? Anyway, whatever your big plan is with us, Rori and me and our companions, Ferelden and the rest of Thedas... you better keep that woman safe. I don't want to appear ungrateful... I am so utterly thankful that she is here with me and that I am allowed so much happiness at all... and not meaning to criticise your creation... that certainly was a whole lot of work... so one certainly cannot expect everything to work out perfectly... but Rori... she's one of your masterpieces. So, I'd very much appreciate if you didn't let her die. Just my humble opinion. Thank you."

Now I can close my eyes, snuggle to my woman, and all wrapped up in her warmth, her scent, her love, I can finally embrace sleep... until the nightmares come to haunt me. But even they are less scary when Rori is around. I do hope I make it easier for her as well.
"Nobody goes that deep into the forest."

I can't remember how often we have heard that sentence the past two weeks. We've travelled through the Brecilian Passage towards Gwaren and we've asked everybody and their dog if they knew someone to guide us through the forest to find the Dalish. Usually - that is when they don't try to bash our heads in, this is the MacTir teyrnir after all - their answers clearly imply that they believe us not to have all our marbles.

Well, we are trying to end that Blight all by ourselves, stop a civil war and - to top it all - declare me king. Of course we're not right in our heads!

Rori by now is tempted to just walk into that forest and kill anything stupid enough to stand in her way. Sten agrees and so does Shale. They both think all this running around and looking for a guide is a waste of time. Sten even thinks looking for the Dalish at all is another delay in facing the real enemy.

"What use can those creatures be?" Sten grumbles. "They have allowed humans to defeat and enslave them."

"Us weak humans, we cannot slay the archdemon with our superior strength and wits. So we rely on masses," Rori winks conspiratorially. Her voice drops to a hushed whisper as she continues: "We make the Dalish stand in the front row so that the archdemon eats them first. With a bit of luck it is too full then to devour us as well. Perhaps it even takes a little nap and then we sneak upon it and slay it. Brilliant plan, huh?" She makes a girlish squeal and pirouettes, then leaves the Qunari standing there, muttering something under her breath. I very much doubt she's complimenting his hairstyle.

Parts of the Qunari philosophy dont sound that bad at all. They even make sense to me. But then there's all the other parts that are awfully scary, just like Sten himself. The way Sten stares after her he's trying to decide if she's just dumb or just nuts or both. The way she grins back at him, she's trying to decide if flipping him the bird was suicidal.

"I have never heard of such a thing called a Qunari." The golem and Sten are standing a bit aside while Rori talks to yet another group of huntsmen without much success. Similar in size and build, the talking statue and the warrior appear like evil twins as they glower at anybody daring to look their direction.

"Then you have not been listening. We did not row to shore last year, we have been about for centuries," Sten replies gloomily.

"I have listened," Shale sulks. "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."
"Relying on humans as a source of education is a fool's errand," Sten says matter-of-factly.

"They are rather ignorant, aren't they? And feeble. At the best of times." Neither the golem nor the Qunari try to keep their voices down. I look over my shoulder into two grim and almost square faces that stare back at me as if I was the very incarnation of a feeble and ignorant human.

I smile foolishly and wave. "Why are they both looking at me?" I mutter to Rori.

"They look at both of us, I dare say. Just don't listen. You should have a whole lot of practice by now from all the not-listening to Morrigan," Rori replies. She's smiling and waving, too. I admit we might not make the brightest impression at that moment.

"Yeah, that's certainly an advantage, being used to major bashing. But how do you cope?" I laugh.

"I grew up amongst nobles, Alistair. Arrogant fools who think themselves superior of anybody else and act as if they have eaten heaps of wisdom with silver spoons are no rarity there." Rori also makes no effort to be silent. Sten's counterattack follows promptly.

"We have creatures on Par Vollen that are similar to humans," the Qunari says casually. "The humans call them 'monkeys'. They are dull, cowardly vermin. They cry out shrilly when threatened and throw their own feces."

"That is an excellent comparison," Shale agrees. "I wonder if they are related?"

"Possibly." The Qunari stares pointedly at Rori and me.

"Whoa, he is good, isn't he? Better even than Morrigan," I observe. "She hasn't yet called me a monkey."

"Monkeys are capable of a learning process," the witch comments as she passes by. "That's more than one can say about you, Alistair."

"Big words for someone who will never be more than a mean bitch no matter how hard she tries," I retort miffedly.

"That's all you can come up with?" Morrigan snorts. "And there I was looking forward to a battle of wits. Alas, I find you are unarmed."

"Couldn't you crawl into a bush somewhere and die? That would be great, thanks," I mutter in a huff. Why do I actually still speak to that awful person. Why does Rori actually still keep her around? Oh, wait, Rori thinks Morrigan's vulnerable and lonely and greatly misunderstood. "Your delicate flower of a witch has been mean to me again," I sulk, hoping beyond hope that Rori is going to show a bit of sympathy for me.

"Just because a flower is delicate, doesn't mean it comes without thorns," Rori laughs, bending in her saddle to quickly smack a kiss to my cheek.

"Alistair, Morrigan is far too obvious to be deceptive. There's others who are more dangerous that way."

In my opinion Rori's far too trusting. Considering what happened to her family, that's something that makes me watch out even more. When she first started to gather her companions, she said she didn't
trust them. But that's just not how she is. She sees the potential to be more, good, even great in people. And she can activate that potential and make those who follow her rise above themselves.

That doesn't apply to Morrigan of course. She was mean, is mean and will always be mean, no matter what Rori says or does. Flemeth sent her with us for a reason and whatever it is, I doubt I will like it.

Sulking, I glare daggers at the back of the witch, wrecking my brain to come up with a way to pay her back. For once I'd like to be the winner of our verbal battles. Usually she just mercilessly stomps me into the ground. And commenting on her nose over and over again gets old quickly. There has to be something, something to prove she's not as smart as she wants me to believe... oh, oh, I think, I got it!

"All right. I've come up with one, a question that you can't answer," I say smugly as I guide my horse to walk next to hers. I try to bite back a victorious grin - and fail miserably.

"Are you talking to me?" Morrigan asks, sounding bored and slightly annoyed as if I was a midge buzzing around her head. Well, this midge is going to sting!

"That's right." I say complacently. "You think you're so smart? I've got an academic question that I bet you won't be able to answer."

"Oh, I doubt that." Morrigan sounds bored.

"So tell me, then: what was the name of Andraste's husband?" Of course I know that Morrigan wasn't taught anything about the Maker and Andraste. I could ask Sten or Oghren the same question and they probably wouldn't know - because it was never of any importance to them. But that's not the point.

"This is a religious question, not an academic one," Morrigan hisses. Her expression is so sour, it makes her whole face wrinkly. That very moment she's the image of her mother.

"You're joking, right?" I laugh in her face. "A five year-old could answer that question. Do you not know more than a child?"

Morrigan answers with a disgusted snort. "I care nothing for your religion. And this game of yours is over." She spurs on her horse to get away from me.

Ha!

"Oh, how the mighty have crumbled," I cheer gleefully, turning in my saddle to celebrate my victory with Rori. But she rolls her eyes at me and shakes her head, more amused than she is annoyed but that's certainly not the reaction I was hoping for.

"What?" I sulk. I begin to feel somewhat stupid.

"Nothing." Rori grins, but she has that look on her face she has reserved for Barkley when he gets caught red pawed stealing cookies, with his head stuck in Sten's backpack and he cannot shake it off without help.

"She couldn't answer it," I insist, not willing to give up my triumph. "She's not as smart as she claims to be."

"Hmm." Rori giggles.
"Oh, come on! Can't I for once win?" I exclaim, sounding as sullen as a sulking child.

"If it makes you feel any better," Rori laughs, reaching out to pinch my cheek, causing me to blush. She never does that. Wynne, quite often. Leliana, always. But never Rori.

Great.

Just great.

Now I feel like a complete retard.

I groan, accepting my defeat.

Fine, I am a complete retard.

All I achieved was to prove Morrigan right when I wanted to show she wasn't. I am stupid - quod erat demonstrandum.

Congratulations, Alistair!

And this wasn't only stupid... It was childish. Silly. Mean.

Now... I wish I could apologize. But... this is Morrigan! I so cannot apologize to Morrigan. I'd rather bite my tongue off and swallow it. And she... deserves this, doesn't she? She certainly does. And if I keep telling myself that, maybe I can get rid of that awful sickness that comes with the shame...

Ohhhh... blast!

"I'm an idiot," I mutter, half to myself, half to Rori.

"So what? You are my idiot and that's all I care about," she says softly and with so much warmth in her voice, her calling me a fool almost sounds like an endearment.

"Now, that's some declaration of love," I grumble and pout. But what am I complaining about? At least she didn't call me...

"Aww, you're so cute!" Rori squeals.

...cute.

"You are on a mission today, aren't you? Cute. Why does it always have to be cute? What about manly? Strong? Hot? Brave?"

"What? Right now?" Rori laughs, trying to stifle it when she sees the miffed and hurt look on my face. "Alistair, you can be all of that. You are all of that, but..."

"Ow, don't say 'but!' I get it!" Angry with myself, I decide it's all Morrigan's fault. She's so mean and nasty, she pushes me to act as mean and nasty as she does. She's like poison, tainting us all. And that mood gets me to make this bet with Zevran. It's not all my idea. Leliana and Oghren are in on it, too. Not that it makes things any better. Anyway, we all gather around the campfire at night expectantly, watching the self-announced womanizer work his magic.

"Has anyone told you what marvellous eyes you possess, my dear?" Zevran remarks nonchalantly, his accent even thicker than usually.

Morrigan shortly looks up from peeling potatoes for supper, completely unimpressed by the elf's
comment. "Again with the flattery? Do you not tire from these pointless exercises?"

"In Antiva, women are accustomed to being showered with the praise they deserve. Men should worship you at your feet as you pass." Zevran sounds as if he's completely at awe, bewitched by Morrigan's ravishing beauty.

"They don't find that incredibly annoying?" Morrigan snorts, deliberately staring at the potato in her hand.

"Or stumble over them?" Rori laughs. I now have the image in mind of Antivan women tripping over men, throwing themselves into the dust at their feet to worship them, with every step they take.

"They are goddesses receiving their subjects, just as you should be. Whatever would be annoying about that?" Zevran asks with a tenderness in his voice, it's incredible he can fake it.

"I have no wish to be placed upon a pedestal," Morrigan says forcefully, glowering at the elf who has left his seat on a log to kneel at the witch's feet. I'd be more careful if I was him. She holds a knife in her hands. The potatoes, however, are forgotten for now. Morrigan suspiciously watches the elf. Then she nervously tucks a loose strand behind her ear.

"But you deserve no less," Zevran cries out yearningly. He claps his hands over his heart, his expression is one of pure admiration. "You should be admired by painters, copied by sculptors, exalted by poets! Surely you know that yours is a beauty so exotic it... it would turn the eye of the Maker Himself!"

"Well, I suppose I..." Morrigan mutters, blushing a deeper shade of red. Even her ears turn pink and there's a small embarrassed, flattered smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She even giggles coquettishly.

That's when Zevran jumps back to his feet, spins on his heels and deeply bows to his audience.

"By the Maker! You were right. You win." I would have never believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my very own eyes.

"Alistair, my friend, I think you owe me five silvers, yes?" Zevran holds out his hand and I drop the coins into his palm.

"You are a master indeed, Zevran. You win the bet fair and square," Leliana comments, clapping her hands before she has her coins join mine.


"Much obliged, madame, ser." The elf grins broadly.

Morrigan's expression is one of confusion but it's quickly replaced by embarrassment, hurt and shock, then it shows defiance before it becomes a mask of ice-cold disgust. "I hate you all," she hisses before she storms away and vanishes between the trees.

Our laughter follows her - although mine dies quickly away when I notice Rori glaring at me.

Doom.

DOOM.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Alistair?" Rori hisses.
Oh Maker, she's hopping mad.

And disappointed. Utterly disappointed.

I duck my head between my shoulders, hoping beyond hope that I am going to wake any moment and find this all to be no more than a bad dream.

"Have you no shame?" Rori turns to the other participants of this ill joke. Then without another word, she leaves us all sitting there and storms after the witch, ladle still in hand. Barkley's at her heels, trotting behind her.

Nobody is laughing anymore. Zevran, Leliana, Oghren and I, we all look like drowned cats, sitting there in crestfallen silence.

"Need a hand with putting up your tent, Alistair, my friend," Zevran offers once Rori is gone.

"My tent?" I ask stupidly. "I have already put up... oh... you think?" She won't kick me out, will she? Oh blast!

I groan as I bury my face in my hands. What is it with Rori and me lately that I constantly manage to put my foot in my mouth and drop bricks the size and weight of Shale?

When I look up again, first things I see are Rori's swords leaning against the log she's been sitting on. Right next to them on the ground lies Morrigan's staff.

Oh Maker! They are out there in the forest at night, unarmed.

We've heard all kinds of stories about that forest. About wild wolves and giant spiders, about malicious trees, vicious spirits and darkspawn appearances.

"I better go after them," I mutter, picking up the weapons as I hurry into the direction where I last saw Rori and Morrigan. As soon as I step out of the ring of light around our campfire, darkness swallows me. It takes me a while to get used to the gloom between the trees with only the cold light of the full moon shining through the still mostly bare branches to guide my way. Standing still and pricking my ears, I can hear the muffled voices of the two women nearby.

I move as silently as possible as not to lose my direction. I do not mean to sneak upon them or to eavesdrop but when I'm in earshot, I realize they're talking about something rather private.

Oh blast!

Should I stay or should I go now? Should I announce my presence? I've made so many mistakes today, I really don't know what to do. It seems whenever I do something it goes fatally wrong. So best do nothing at all? I take a few insecure steps closer and Rori and Morrigan come into sight. They sit on the ground with their legs crossed, their knees almost touching as they face each other. They stick their heads together and Rori's hand rests on Morrigan's slumped shoulder. I cannot make out what she says but Morrigan nods and then angrily wipes the corners of her eyes. Barkley wags his short tail and licks the witch's hand, causing her to wipe it off at her pants. Still she pets his head.

"It's a curious thing," the witch muses as she straightens. Her voice sounds a bit... pressed, almost as if she's been crying - or trying hard not to cry. "I do not know how else to describe it."

"You sound confused," Rori observes.
"Indeed I am... a little," Morrigan admits. "I am reminded of our first meeting in the wilds. I had been in animal form for some time, watching your progress."

"What animal?" Rori asks curiously.

"What? Oh, really, this is of no importance..." Morrigan sighs. "A wolf. I was a wolf. Now, I am trying to tell you something. Could you just shut up and listen?"

"I'm quiet as a mouse," Rori grins, causing Morrigan to snort. It's not the disgusted noise she makes when she snorts at me. It sounds far more amused.

"I was intrigued to see such a formidable woman obviously more potent than the men she travels with. Yet I resented it when Flemeth designed me to travel with you."

"You weren't the only one," Rori laughs.

"Oh, can we please not talk about that idiot now," Morrigan groans. "It is beyond me how you can endure his presence. He really has to be very, very good in bed to make up for... everything else."

"Oh, you cannot even imagine," Rori laughs.

Oh no, no, no... girl talk with Morrigan!

Doom!

DOOM!

I've had nightmares about this. Really bad, horrible, awful nightmares.

"I do not want to imagine! That's... so gross!" Morrigan shudders. Then she tucks a loose strand behind her ear before she plucks a blade of grass and turns it around in her fingers absentmindedly. "But that's not what I wanted to tell you... I... I assumed that at best you would drive me from your company as soon as we left the wilds."

"Why should I do that?"

"Oh, ask that fool Alistair, he certainly can give you a reason or two."

"More like a dozen," Rori laughs and Morrigan pulls a face. "He's been trained to become a templar," my fellow Warden says softly. "It wasn't his choice but after a decade in the Chantry, what do you expect of him? You have your survival strategy, he has his, depending on both your experiences and upbringing."

"You even manage to make Alistair's behaviour sound reasonable," Morrigan mutters sullenly. She inhales deeply as if to prepare for a confession that is hard to make. "I'm aware that I have... little talent for forming friendships, to put it lightly. It's something I know nothing of, nor ever thought I need it. Yet when I discovered Flemeth's plan, you did not abandon me."

"Morrigan, that's what friends do for each other. I couldn't just sit there and have you live in fear of your mother coming after you to steal your body."

"And that is what I do not understand. I've been regarding you as a... friend for some time now, but... of all the things I could have imagined what would have resulted when Flemeth told me to go with you, the very last would have been that I would find in you a friend... perhaps even a sister."

Morrigan's voice fades away and she breaks eye contact with Rori for a moment. She looks so...
small and vulnerable... so human. Rori takes her hands and squeezes them assuringly.

"I want you to know..." Morrigan goes on, her voice a whisper so full of affection, although there's still confusion in it and... gratitude. "...that while I may not always prove worthy of your friendship, I will always value it."

And then the girls hug.

I've been feeling like a prick before. Now I feel like a terribly stupid, awfully mean, horribly base prick. And all that because of Morrigan!

I slop down on the soft ground littered with fir needles and try to recover from my sudden and unexpected burst of sympathy for Morrigan. This is world-shattering and it makes me feel uneasy, uncomfortable... I cannot accept it.

My templar training finally gets the better of me. This is Morrigan! A witch of the Wilds, a mean, sneaky, malicious, deceptive... bitch. She's pretending. She has to be pretending. And Rori falls for it. I can make myself accept that there's mages who aren't that bad. Like Wynne. Maybe even Solona. Or Connor who never meant to harm anybody. But most certainly not Morrigan!

Okay, my world can keep on turning now that I have figured this out... perhaps... hopefully...

My thoughts get disturbed by Barkley's frantic barking and a loud howl - that is answered by several other howls at once. It's close. Closer than I'd feel comfortable with - and it sounds like a... wolf?

I jump to my feet and burst through the bushes onto the small clearing to join with Morrigan and Rori at the same time as two huge creatures, wolflke and yet humanoid, emerge from the shadows. They are faster than I am. Too fast for Morrigan to cast a spell, too fast for both women to outrun them.

Rori charges forward, evading the claws of the first attacker by closing the distance between them. She stomps on one paw, rams her elbow into the beast's side and rams her ladle upwards in a fluid motion. The werewolf recovers far too quickly, grabs her, lifts her up and throws her against an old oak as if she was a doll.

Morrigan's life is saved by stumbling over a log - and by me. The creature attacking her blocks my way to reach Rori. I drop Morrigan's staff and Rori's swords, draw my own weapon and aim to make short work of the beast. Out of the corner of my eyes I see Rori climbing a tree like a squirrel. The werewolf is right behind her, snapping at her feet while Barkley snaps at its behind. It's jaws close around her ankle, she screams and kicks at its nose with her free foot as she desperatedly clings to a branch to not fall off the tree. Growling, the creature stumbles backwards with Rori's boot clenched between its jaws.

Morrigan freezes the beast with a spell so badly aimed she almost hits me instead when the second werewolf drives me backwards. Its long arms give it a wide range and it's both incredibly fast and strong, gripping my shield and hauling it away, almost breaking my arm as it yanks it from me. Using the opening the werewolf gives me when it's busy with my shield, I let myself fall forward, running the beast through. Its momentum when it tumbles backwards, grabbing at the blade, pulls the sword from my hands. Any human would go down now. Unfortunately this is no human but an oversized flea-infested furcoat in bloodthirsty frenzy.

Roaring, it pulls the sword from its belly and casts it away as if it was a toothpick.

Blast!

Rori screams when the beast charges, I yelp and try to run, but I'm neither as quick nor as lithe as
Rori. Where she can double like a hare, all I manage is a clumsy attempt. Morrigan's spell freezes the ground instead of the werewolf and I slip and fall, feeling the swoosh of the razor-sharp talons scraping my scalp.

Whoa!

Close. Too close. I don't even want to imagine what those paws would have done with my head. Instead I find myself worrying about my hairstyle and if the werewolf messed it up by shaving a bald spot into it. I don't want to die with a bald spot on my head. Not that there would be much head left should that monster get hold of it.

"Alistair! Run!" Rori shouts. "Stop fumbling around with your hair!"

Howls echo through the forest, announcing the arrival of more wolves when I finally manage to pick myself up from the ground. The shouts of our companions draw closer, I can see the flames of their torches, red and orange dots dancing through the forest like giant fireflies. An arrow whirs past me. Someone shouts something about a stupid shem. It's an elf, no, three of them, but only one moves with the fluent grace of a huntsman. The second handles his bow clumsily. The third is a woman. She can hardly stand on her own feet and her shots are weak and badly aimed.

More werewolves arrive and so does the rest of our little group, with Sten leading the attack. Our forces combined, we defeat the beasts. It's not an easy fight. Wynne curses like a drunken sailor, Oghren chops at the furry legs of the creatures as if they were tree trunks. Shale crushes a few heads like grapes...

"What is a bunch of bare-skinned shem like you doing in our forest?" the elven archer demands to know when finally the battle is over. The elves don't lower their bows, their arrows now aimed at us. It's a bit ridiculous, considering our assembled forces.

"We're looking for the Dalish. Seems they have found us," Rori replies as she carefully lets herself fall off the tree and into my arms. I want to take a look at her foot, see if she's injured, if there are biting marks piercing her flesh, but she quickly retrieves her boot from the frozen wolf and puts it on again, gritting her teeth against the pain.

I frown and open my mouth to scold her, but she shakes her head. "Later," she mouthes, then presses her lips to mine to stop any further protest. The presence of the Dalish keeps me from starting an argument anyway. That doesn't mean I'm not worried or scared. Maker, if she was bitten by a werewolf, if it really hurt her... Every child in Ferelden has heard enough stories about these beasts to take this more than just serious.

"What do you want of the Dalish, shemlen?" the archer asks suspiciously.

Something is odd about them. The woman, she seems so weak... she's deadly pale in the light of the torches, there's dark, almost black shadows beneath her eyes. It looks a lot like the darkspawn taint.

"We're Grey Wardens, there's a Blight, you guys signed a treaty," Rori summarizes tiredly. "Now, do you have a boss or are we going to stand here and wait until these beasts return?"

"Actually," the archer says slowly. "We are looking for the Dalish, too. For the last clan still present in this area. Our clan left a while ago but we stayed behind, hoping to find Keeper Zathrian. But we couldn't go deeper into the forest because of these beasts... It's too dangerous for only the three of us."

"Well, you could come with us. Together we should make it, right?" Rori offers quickly. She's ashen
and leans against me for support, trying not to put too much weight on her foot.

"Deal," the archer says. "It's time to introduce ourselves, I guess. That's Pol and I'm Fenarel. And this," he motions towards the pale female, "is Lyna Mahariel."
Fabulous NotevenSorry's 5000th hit giveaway.
The three elves lead us deeper into the forest at the break of dawn. We didn't get much rest last night. The werewolves didn't dare to attack our camp but we all had to be watchful instead of simply relying on the insomniac golem. I didn't get to talk to Rori about her foot and when I ask her in the morning, she just smiles and says that she's alright.

"My boots are made of dragonskin, remember?" Rori points out. "And they were made by Wade. That werewolf could have gnawed at it all it wanted, there's no way through." She keeps herself busy with soaping my face for my shave as she talks. Not once does she look me in the eye.

"Rori... you would tell me if... wouldn't you?"

She kisses the top of my head, right there where the werewolf sawed off some of my hair. That blasted bastard! "You worry too much, Alistair. Really, everything is fine. Now keep still."

Rori claims she's fine. So does Lyna, the elven woman with the always tousled dark hair and her large golden eyes. The few days we've been travelling together now, she's been acting as if nothing was wrong with her. She cannot fool me, though. I've seen too many people infected with the taint to misinterpret the black shadows beneath her feverish hazy eyes and the paleness of her skin. She's so weak, she can hardly walk, so we have her ride with Pol seated behind her, holding her so that she won't fall off the horse.

"So... your illness... it's the darkspawn taint, isn't it?"

"Can't fool a Grey Warden, huh?" Lyna offers a pained grin. "A friend and I, we've been too curious, stuck our noses too deep into some cave and found a mirror with a dark aura. Tamlen touched it. I told him no but he was never one to listen." She sighs heavily, her expression thoughtful and sad as she is lost in memories. The way she says his name... with so much warmth and affection and sadness... "I don't know what happened then or how I made it out of that cave. Tamlen just disappeared. We still don't know what happened to him."

"Tamlen," I mutter, trying to remember where I've heard that name before.

"We've met an elf of that name a while ago," Rori says carefully. She reaches into one of her satchels at her belt and pulls a small amulet from it, showing it to Lyna.

"That's Tamlen's!" she gasps, snatching it from Rori as if it was a sacrilege of the human to touch it. "Where did you meet him? What did he say? Why doesn't he come back?"

"He... he's dead," Rori says quietly after a moment of hesitation. "I'm... I'm sorry."

"Dead?" Lyna shrieks. "What did you do, shem? Did you kill him?" Her eyes blaze with hatred and disgust.

"He had turned into a ghoul," Rori explains softly.

"You killed him!" Lyna spits into her face. Her expression is a mask of pain and contempt. If she had any strength left, she'd throw herself at Rori to scratch her eyes out. "Dirty shem, you killed him!"
"Lyna, if he was a ghoul there's nothing they could have done," Fenarel says soothingly, her name a soft caress. He tries to take her hand but she pulls away from him, leaving him stand there with his hand outstretched. She's out of reach for him, no matter how hard he tries. Tamlen, though dead and gone, stands between them.

"The shem killed him. Murderous brute," Lyna hisses with tears streaming from her eyes.

"Oh, shut the fuck up, bitch," Rori snarls with her teeth bared. She glowers at the mourning elf, her fists are clenched at her sides as if she has trouble to hold herself back from punching Lyna straight in her face.

This... outburst... it comes so unexpected and forcefully, it leaves me stunned and speechless for a moment. What in the name of the Maker...? She's been all... understanding and nice and then BOOM!

"Shame on you, Rori Cousland." Wynne is the first one to recover. "This is no appropriate behaviour for a young lady... this is no appropriate behaviour for anybody!"

Meanwhile I pull Rori away from the elf, stopping her from turning on the mage at the same time. My hands rest on her shoulders and I can feel how tense she is. "Whoa, Rori, calm down. She doesn't mean it. Don't you see she just needs to blame someone? It's nothing personal."

"Oh... yes, of course. I'm sorry," Rori mutters, uneasily raking her fingers through her hair as she notices everybody is staring at her slack-jawed. "I overreacted. Sorry."

"Are you sure, you're alright?" I ask worriedly. "You seem rather... tense." That's quite an understatement. I've never seen her like that - and she's a ginger. Fits of temper come naturally to her - at least that's what Zevran says about redheads, Leliana, she's been tamed by the Chantry, but the Antivan elf is sure, the volcano inside of her is only sleeping. Well, Rori's certainly isn't sleeping anymore. It's boiling over.

"Yes, sure, I'm fine. Just a bit tired." She smiles broadly at me, then tiptoes to give me a peck to the cheek.

Frowning, I watch her, wondering what got her riled up so easily. Sure, she has an explosive temper, especially when she's tired but that was far worse than her usual grumpiness that comes with lack of sleep and lack of coffee.

She's back to being her cheerful self now, chatting amiably with Leliana. She didn't even bite my head off for being mean to Morrigan. I expected her to be mad at me for much longer, but she's been real sweet towards me. More than just sweet... almost eager... she's been all over me during our morning rituals and at night in our tent. Okay, yes, that's nothing special... joined at the hips, right? But... I don't know how to describe it... We've had a tough time ever since that incident on the ship. And Rori's been awfully thin-skinned about it... like when I asked her to improve her... err... lamppost-licking... But this morning, she just gave it a try without any awkwardness or guilt involved... It almost seemed as if she desperately wanted to make everything right again...

Now when I watch her, I wonder what I am worried about. I'm telling myself that she's just being herself... After some time I manage to convince myself... and my scrutiny gets distracted by her more obvious charms quickly...

How the sun makes her hair shine, it's as brilliant as a ruby... that sound of her bubbling laughter... the way she tilts her head to one side when she's teasing someone... and that beautiful smile so full of love when she looks over her shoulder and spots me... those long, slender legs... the way her hips
Wynne chuckling next to me, disturbs my trail of thought. I turn and find her smiling smugly. Something is really amusing her.

"Why are you smiling like that? You look suspiciously like the cat who swallowed the pigeon," I say, frowning at her. I know that granny mage and her frail old lady act. She so can't fool me!

"Canary."

"What?"

"I look like the cat that swallowed the canary."

Oh, ah, haha. And here I am, feeling stupid again.

"I once had a very large cat," I mutter. "But that's not my point. My point is why are you smirking?"

Wynne chuckles, highly amused. I cannot get rid of the impression I am the reason for her amusement. "You were watching her. With great interest, I might add. In fact, I believe you were...enraptured."

"Rori's our leader," I mutter. I feel caught red-handed. Rori and I have been together for several months now, we've had countless moments of ultimative embarrassment and still, whenever Wynne comments on her and me... I get all flustered and nervous and my palms begin to sweat... She has become like a granny to me and the last thing I want my own granny to comment on, is my rather active love-life... "I look to her for guidance," I say firmly, hoping beyond hope that I sound convincing.

I didn't think Wynne's smirk could get even wider. She's grinning from ear to ear now. "Oh, I see. So what guidance did you find in those swaying hips hmm?"

Err...

Oh...

Blast!

"No no, I wasn't looking at...you know her...hind-quarters," I hurry to say. My voice sounds a little too high.

I so was looking at her firm little buttocks but I will never ever admit that to Wynne. Even more so when admiring Rori's lower backside involves fantasizing about her bent over my knee and my palm connecting with her soft flesh as I spank her...

Oh blast!

My ears are burning, my whole face is burning. I'm blushing so violently, my head glows like a beacon.

"Certainly."

"I gazed...glanced, in that direction, maybe, but I wasn't staring...or really seeing anything even," I stammer and squirm.

Fact is... I saw more than was there as I imagined Rori naked... and how that sweet pink slit between
her legs becomes visible when she bends over...

Wynne looks at me as if she can read my very mind. As if all those sinful thoughts are visible to her...

Oh Andraste help me! A werewolf-attack would come in handy now. Or anything else distracting. I'm not picky.

"Of course." Wynne laughs and pinches my cheek.

"I hate you," I mutter gloomily. "You're a bad person."

That moment Rori comes bouncing towards me. She's as giddy as a mabari puppy and she pounces me with as much exuberance. She almost has me tumble down. Just her kisses aren't that drivelling. Clinging to me with her legs wrapped around my waist she just grabs and kisses me with overwhelming passion.

"What... what was that for?" I gasp, grinning back at her foolishly as she beams at me as if I was the center of her universe.

"Because I love you," she whispers. Another peck to my forehead and she's gone again, dancing down the path with Barkley at her heels. Every time she pirouettes she blows kisses in my direction - until she trips over a root and lands face forward in the mud.

"I'm fine," she assures me when I help her back to her feet. My reward is another deep, longing kiss.

I'm certainly not going to complain... but her behaviour is a little odd... She's like that all day long - with fits of temper in between that leave everybody speechless and puzzled. I'm worried out of my mind while I try to make sense of her. She won't give me more than lame excuses or attempts of making light of her quick changes of mood and those fits of rage that she makes up for with returning to be ravishingly charming.

Over and over again she repeats how much she loves me. Or she whispers in my ear how much she's looking forward to making love to me. She smiles whenever she looks at me, kisses me, caresses my face...

"I think you make her very happy," Wynne remarks when we take a rest on a small clearing next to a little creek. Her comment startles me as I've been worrying about my fellow Warden. Rori doesn't act like she's happy. I mean, she appears happy. But I know her too well by now. She's a cheerful little spitfire, hardly ever letting herself being weighed down for long by anything. All the things she does and did today, that's just like her... but... too much like her. Right now she's so enormously happy on the outside, it makes me wonder what she's trying to compensate.

"Not this again," I groan. "I'm ready this time."

"I just wanted to say that this was something good, for both of you. Being a Grey Warden isn't easy. I'm glad you found each other." Wynne smiles warmly at me.

"Oh, yes, I bet you are, indeed," I snort, glowering at her while I wait for the inevitable turn of this conversation, that moment when she mercilessly teases me until I blush from head to toe.

"Cherish this. It may not last." The granny mage pets the back of my hand and I draw it away quickly, expecting far worse to follow.

"And?" I ask suspiciously.
"That's all I had to say." Wynne picks up her knitting again. Seems Schmooples will get another pullover. She tried to make one for Barkley, too, until Rori pointed out he is a proud Fereldan mabari and not some Orlesian poodle.

I wait. Now, now it's going to happen... but Wynne just keeps knitting.

"Really? No pinching my cheeks? No making me blush?" Oh, come on, she has something planned, right?

"Of course not. I like you, Alistair. You deserve to be happy." A warm, grandmotherly smile is all I get.

"Not even pinching my cheeks a little?" I mutter, wondering if she's going to come back for me later with some masterplan.

Wynne just smiles and shakes her head - and then I have to go and rescue Leliana from being stomped into the ground by Rori.

"Oh stop giving me shit about that bitch Marjolaine! You've been going on about her for weeks now. Fucking get over it!" Rori shouts at a completely shocked Leliana. The poor woman is close to tears and quickly retreats when Rori throws a small pot at her. "And stop pretending you're oh so special! You're not some second Andraste, you're just a big pretender who can't accept how unimportant she is!"

"Whoa, whoa! Rori! Give it a rest!" I grab her by her shoulders and find myself face to face with a frenzied fury. She shoves me away forcefully. Usually that wouldn't make me stumble, not when I expect it. It has to be her anger that gives her enough strength to send me to the ground.

"Shut up!" she screams, her face bright red, teeth bared, sweat dripping off her forehead. "Shut up and leave me alone!" In the stunned silence that follows, with everybody staring at her in bewilderment, she bursts into tears. "Sorry," she breathes. Hugging herself, she looks so small and lost with her large blue eyes all round and fearful. Then she turns on her heels and walks off, swaying a little as if she were tipsy.

"What was that?" Leliana mutters. "Has she lost her mind completely?"

We are all used to Rori's often unexpected explosions of temper when things just get too stressful for her. But this... this was different. It was violent, aggressive, dangerous. The look on her face... as if she had been stripped of all humanity... it was scary... she was scary...

"I don't know," I say. "I'm sure, though, she didn't mean it. I will talk to her."

I pick myself off the ground to go after her. Rori sits on a flat boulder lying across the creek. She tears a blade of grass to tiny pieces, dropping them into the water. "I'm sorry," she mutters when she hears me approach. She looks so miserable, I can't be mad at her. But I'm worried and confused and afraid that I could lose her. Even more so when she hugs me tightly, clinging to me, with her face pressed against the crook of my neck.

"Hey, don't nuzzle... it tickles!" I can feel her smile against my skin. And of course she keeps nuzzling just to hear me giggle. Silly brat. "Seriously, what's wrong, Rori? And don't say 'nothing'."

"Alistair, please, I don't even know where to begin," she groans, finally letting go of me. Utterly frustrated, she pulls at her hair and kicks a small stone.

"Is... is this about us?" I croak, my voice timid and small. I like to believe that love is eternal, but life
has taught me that love does have an end and it only endures as much before it is extinguished. Is that what's happening here?

"No!" she cries. "No, Alistair, please... I love you. You are such a wonderful, wonderful man..."

"But?"

"No but. There's never a 'but' with you, Alistair. You make me feel loved and wanted and protected... you make me laugh... you are... the only man I ever want to lick a lamppost with." She leans against me and I wrap my arms around her, inhaling the scent of verbena as I nuzzle the top of her head.

Oh Maker, how much I love her!

"I'm just..." She shrugs helplessly. "Oh, bloody blast it! We should go and find the Dalish and finally slay that stupid archdemon. It's about time, don't you think?"

The sun is already setting when the Dalish find us. They are for sure not too pleased to see us, considering the amount of arrows nocked and pointed in our direction. Fenarel, Rori and I step forward to meet the young blonde elf that appears to be the speaker of the group.

"Stop right there, outsider," she warns us. "The Dalish have camped in this spot. I suggest you go elsewhere and quickly."

"And I suggest you get out of my way, and quickly," Rori snarls unexpectedly and all of a sudden, before Fenarel has a chance to explain our presence. With her eyes squinted, she glowers menacingly at the assembled elves. This is not Rori anymore... this is someone... something else...

"What the fuck?" I mutter.

"Language," Wynne replies automatically.

The shock doesn't last long. The Dalish are the first to jump back into action. And it's only due to Fenarel, Pol and Lyna that we are still alive. Without them stepping forward, we'd have so many arrows sticking out of us, we'd look like porcupines. Rather dead porcupines.

"Atisha!" Fenarel cries out when the already wary and suspicious behaviour Dalish become clearly hostile. A single arrow whirs through the air, piercing the ground right in front of Rori's feet. She growls and reaches for her swords, not caring at all for Fenarel's desperate attempt to calm down the other elves.

"Err... whoa... everybody be cool!" I shout. "You, Rori, be cool!" She's far from cool, though. She's seething and I have to tackle her to stop her from lunging herself at the Dalish woman who greeted us. "See, my hands are nowhere near my weapons..." That's because I need both my hands to drag Rori away from the front and pin her down so that she cannot do something incredibly stupid and suicidal. She kicks and snarls and bites my hand... "Good luck with the gauntlet, kitten," I pant, grunting with the effort of holding her down. In the end I only manage by putting my whole weight on her and she still tries to throw me off. "Rori, what in the name of the Maker..."

Giving up her struggle, Rori becomes very still. The anger that has driven her to start a fight with the Dalish has vanished. She just looks at me, eyes wide and round and glistening with tears. "Alistair," she says calmly, her voice hardly audible. "You have to take the lead."

"W-What?" A look in her face tells me, she's damn serious. I laugh nervously. "What? Lead? Me? No, no, no. No leading. Bad things happen when I lead. We get lost, people die, and the next thing
you know I'm stranded somewhere without any pants."

At least she hasn't forgotten how to laugh. "You stranded without your pants is nothing connected to your leading abilities these days," she teases, but there's a sadness to her smile that makes me shudder. So does her kiss as warm and sweet as it is.

"Fenarel says you are Grey Wardens?" The Dalish woman doesn't sound convinced. She glares suspiciously at Rori when I pull her back to her feet and she compunctiously mutters her apologies. "He says you helped them through the forest. Therefore I will bring you to Keeper Zathrian. I advise you behave better when you meet him."

Usually that's the moment when Rori takes the lead and the rest of us follow. But now she doesn't. She just stands there and waits. The moment stretches and becomes awkward. "Err... right, let's go," I mumble and follow the Dalish with Rori trudging behind. It's impossible not to notice the silent looks shared by our companions.

"I suggest you keep your hands to yourself," the elven woman warns us. "And remember that our arrows are still trained on you."

No surprise there after Rori's amiable greeting.

"What's wrong with her?" Zevran mutters under his breath as he joins me at the front of the group. "I'd bet she was utterly sexually frustrated if I didn't know better. So, is this just the worst menstrual moodiness I've ever witnessed or did you knock her up?"

"What? No! How... I never... I did not... I can't..."

"Alistair, my dear friend, you do know where the babies come from, don't you?" Zevran asks suspiciously.

"Andraste's flaming sword! Not that again! I do know where the babies come from! Wynne already explained that to me, thank you... err... and I already knew before... Blast! Yes, I am aware that our... err... exertions... can lead to certain... circumstances... but... not with two Grey Wardens."

"Alas, whatever it is that has her riled up like this - make it stop."

"That's the plan," I mutter.

While Fenarel and his friends are welcomed with a warm meal and offered a place to rest, we are shooed to the Keeper at once. It's quite obvious they want to get rid of us again as quickly as possible. It's also quite obvious, this clan has a problem. The stench of blood and illness is so strong in some places of the camp, it's hard to ignore. So are the moans and pained cries of the injured and dying people.

"Whatever their problem is, I bet we have to solve it," Rori sighs.

"I bet you are right," I mumble. As if we didn't have our own problems. Rori for sure has one. And if she has one, so do I. I can hardly concentrate on the task at hand. One because I am worried out of my mind because of my beloved fellow Warden. Two because she pushed me to the front.

Zathrian proves to be a bald fellow - and a mage.

Hooray! Just exactly what I was looking for. More apostates! This day is getting better every minute.

Zathrian's not too fond of dogs it seems. And not too fond of us. "Who are these strangers? And a
hound amongst them, as if we haven't had enough problems with such creatures! I have precious little patience and less time to spend on outsiders today."

Barkley's response is a low growl. No surprise there.

What is rather surprising is Rori growling, too. I stare at her with my jaw having dropped open, she blinks, coughs, grins sheepishly and retreats to hide behind Shale with her dog.

Holy fucking shit!

Mental note to myself: Serious talk with Rori as soon as I can catch her alone.

P.S.: Not get myself distracted by any attempts of lamppost-licking.

Thankfully Zathrian is too busy telling and showing us why it is impossible to help us with the Blight.

Rori is visibly upset at the sight of the injured elves on their makeshift cots, writhing and squirming in dreadful pain. I am visibly upset about how upset she is because... No, I don't even want to think about it. There is another explanation. There has to be another explanation. "What... what caused their illness?"

"The affliction is a curse that runs rampant in their blood, bringing great agony and then ultimatively either death or the transformation into something monstrous," Zathrian explains solemnly.

"A werewolf?" Rori gasps, her face ashen. She's trembling, hugging herself as if she's cold, still sweat forms on her brow and she keeps wiping her forehead with her sleeve until I offer her another of my handkerchieves. I wonder what she has done with all the others I've already given her. She has to have a huge collection by now.

"Yes, that's what they become," Zathrian confirms.

"Okay, so if we find this Witherfang and bring its heart to you, then the curse will end and you will stay true to your people's promise to help us with the Blight?" I groan. I am tempted to agree with Sten: we do not need the Dalish and their trouble. I'd rather take Rori as far away from this damned forest as possible. It has an ill effect on her. But Rori - despite clearly disliking the elf - has different plans.

That much for my leadership...

"We'll help you," she says firmly with her typical determination. "Just one question... is there a protection against that curse?"

"The only protection is not to get bitten."

Now, isn't that awesome? Maybe we should send Shale to solve that problem alone? She's already muttering something under her breath about weak flesh-creatures and her own stony superiority.

"And what happens if one does get bitten?" Rori inquires. "How does one know if one is infected?"

Her question has me prick my ears.

"You will know within a few days," Zathrian informs us. "You begin to sweat and vomit and most telling your temper will become wild and uncontrollable. If that happens to you, you should seek out Witherfang even more swiftly. Your mission at that point will be rather personally."
"Indeed," Rori mutters. She looks thoughtful, chewing at her bottom lip as she strolls away with Barkley following her. She kicks every stone that gets in her way and when Wynne softly asks her if she needs to talk, she almost jumps into the granny mage's face, snapping furiously at her to fucking mind her own business.

That's it. Time to talk. Now.

No more guessing. No more denial. Just the truth... the dreadful, heartbreaking truth.

"No," I say firmly when I take Rori by her elbow to drag her along and she opens her mouth to protest.

There's a small pond close to the Dalish camp but out of earshot. That's where I take her, having her sit down while I keep standing, towering over her. I'm too nervous to sit. "Rori," I croak, trying to find the courage to ask the question I have to ask. There's a lump in my throat so huge and thick, it feels like suffocating. "Is.. have you... you've been behaving like a complete nutcase... and..."

Sighing, Rori takes pity of me and instead of forcing me to stammer and sputter for much longer, she pulls off her boot and the archdemon sock. Her foot is wrapped in a bandage clotted with dried blood. She removes it, gritting her teeth against the pain... the moment the bandage comes off, the biting marks around her ankle become visible.

"You're infected," I murmur. The shock makes my voice hollow and small. I slump down next to her, carefully brushing her damp curls from her forehead.

Strangely it's not that big a surprise - certainly a nasty one - but nothing I wouldn't have expected. Now it all makes sense. Even her asking me to lead. She must have realized at least that she is not capable of making decisions any longer. There was something looming over her ever since that night when she went after Morrigan and the werewolves attacked for the first time. She said, the werewolf's fangs hadn't pierced through her boot. She lied. She knew what was about to happen but she didn't say a word. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you trust me?"

"This is not about trust, Alistair," she whispers as she leans against me. "I... didn't want to make you worry. I just wanted some time of happiness for us, without being constantly reminded I would turn into a monster." It's typical for her that she doesn't even waste a thought on the possibility of dying. She just decides, she won't die. Stubborn little brat. "You're probably right, though. I shouldn't have kept the truth from you. It was a selfish thing to do. I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. I understand." No use to get mad at her now. I've seen the elves and how the curse tortures them. The realization that Rori will have to endure this torment as well, it's almost unbearable. "So, what do we do now?"

"Break the curse of course," Rori says matter-of-factly.

"That's my girl," I chuckle.

Her unyieldingness is reassuring. It's easier to make myself believe her illness can be cured when she's so fractious herself. The way she's talking about the curse, it's going to be a stroll in the park and Witherfang will present us its heart on a silver plater... still...

"But... what if we cannot break it? Or when there's no healing? What if Witherfang's death doesn't undo the transformation?" I mutter. Didn't I ask the Maker to keep her safe over and over again? Didn't I beg and make promises? Didn't I offer my own life as a sacrifice as long as he spared hers? And the people wonder why I have troubles with my faith!
"Oh, I wouldn't be too worried about that," Rori grins, pulling me close for a kiss. "Your slobbering, flying relatives from the Anderfels would be so delighted. Your mother is a bitch and your woman is a bitch, too. Oh, how proud they would be of your choice!"

"Imagine the family reunions!" I add, hugging her close to me. Oh Maker, I don't want to let go of her anymore - as if holding on to her could change anything. She's trembling and so am I. "You can all slobber together and howl at the moon. I'll scratch your bellies and throw sticks for you."

"We'd lead a dog's life!" Rori cheers.

"Don't we do that already?"

"That would be the enhanced version."

"Ah, let's not be greedy. I'm content with what we've got."

Chapter End Notes

When Zathrian mentioned a bite could cause this mission to become more personal, I was expecting something to happen in my first playthrough. It then seemed odd that nothing did happen. So now, here we go.
"Alistair," Rori whispers, sounding so serious it wipes the silly grin off my face at once. She takes both my hands in her sweaty palms. The moon reflects in her eyes, two dark pools of midnight blue. Maker, she's so beautiful, even more when she's sad. "Promise me you won't give up. Promise you will end this curse, no matter how difficult a task it will prove to be... and... if there is no cure..."

I take it we're done with the slobbering dog relatives.

I lay my fingers on her lips gently to stop her from finishing that sentence. I do not want to hear it. As long as it's not spoken out loud, I can pretend this is not going to happen. "I'm sure you're more capable of saving yourself than I am of rescuing you," I chuckle, although it sounds a bit forced. She has always been there for me from the beginning. Without her I'd still be standing in front of Flemeth's hut, looking foolish. She's the stronger one of the two of us. And she is my future. Without her, what is there for me to care about?

"When I transform there will be nothing left of me. I will be no more than a beast, driven by instincts."

"You do not know that..."

"I do," Rori interrupts firmly in a tone that suffocates any further discussion. Her voice is accompanied by a low growl. She immediately claps her hands over her mouth when she notices. "Shit," she gasps. "Alistair, please. I doubt I have much time left. Morrigan has potions for me that ease the symptoms, painkillers mostly, but they cannot slow down the curse. They keep me going, that's it. And I can feel the change inside of me."

"Wait! Morrigan knew about all this? You trust her more than you trust me?" I sulk. I can't help it. Part of me wants to kick my ass for those questions and still the words spill out of my mouth.

"Alistair!" Rori cries in exasperation.

I offer a foolish lopsided grin and a shrug. "Fine, I promise... no, I swear I will end this curse," I sigh when Rori keeps scowling at me.

"You could at least try to sound a little more confident, couldn't you?" Rori grins, leaning in to steal a kiss from my lips. It's just a soft caress but I have no intention to let her get away like that. Not when it could be the last time I get to hold her, to love her. Sure, every moment could be the last. But to witness my beautiful beloved ginger go to the dogs...literally... Oh Maker, I have to hold her, feel her...

"Alistair," she gasps when I pull her flush against my chest. "I could... I don't want to hurt you..."

The rest of her protest is muffled by my kiss. One moment I have my tongue stroking hers and it's all gentle and sweet with a slowly growing passion... next I'm on my back with her on top and my shirt is... gone. I doubt even Wynne can mend it anymore. Rori practically shreds it. I'm still gawking and
gasping while she tears at the breeches of my pants. Her bosom is heaving magnificently indeed, there's a wild and feral expression on her face and her eyes... her eyes are... glowing softly... oh, whoa... I very much doubt that's the light of purity Oghren mentioned... it's more... creepy... and she is... growling lowly in her throat...

"Ro-rori!?" I squeak, laughing nervously as I squirm beneath her. Quickly I catch her wrists, just in case... although I'm so not sure I could win against her right now. "Your... err... your eyes..."

She glowers at me for a moment with her glowing eyes, her expression is so alien and feral, it's not exactly bound to calm me down. I am close to freaking out and throw her off when she snaps out of her monster mode and blinks at me in confusion. "What?"

"Err... nothing..." I manage a smile... and wish I hadn't even tried as it turns out nothing but fake. "Maybe we should just go to bed and... do you want some hot milk? I love hot milk with honey when I can't sleep. I could get you some..." I babble, as I carefully lift her off me. Oh Maker, she looks hurt. I do feel sorry. This is not her fault... and she warned me... I do love her. Really! But... well, when your woman begins to bark and growl and act like a huge dog... even Zevran wouldn't go for this... well, perhaps he would...

"I think I should put up my tent." That's all Rori says. She looks so sad and lonely when she picks herself up from the ground, it makes my heart bleed.

"No, Rori, that's... not necessary." I try to take her hand but she pulls away, her expression pained and frightened.

"Oh, come on, Alistair! The way you just looked at me... you were scared, terrified..."

"Your eyes glowed," I protest. "You growled and... were behaving like... a huge dog."

"That's what I am... kinda," Rori whispers, hugging herself. She stands all alone in the darkness, lost in a wilderness that is threatening to swallow her...

She is dangerous. She could drag me down with her. She could kill me.

Oh, bloody blast it!

She's my woman!

I just have to hug her. How can I not stand beside her? She would never let me down. She wouldn't even consider it. Not for a single moment. All this talking about love and devotion, what's it worth when my actions don't stay true to my words?

I pull her against me and this time Rori doesn't push me away. She just melts into my embrace, her face buried at my chest as she cries; her sobs making her shoulders tremble. I stroke her hair, mumble sweet nonsense that we both know not to be true and finally pick her up to carry her to our tent and tuck her into bed next to me. I hold her in my arms until she dozes off. Her sleep is uneasy and troubled, by her nightmares and the curse that burns inside of her. She writhes in pain, whines and whimpers like an injured dog. It's almost more than I can endure to see her like that. I feel so useless and helpless...

Andraste's flaming sword! Listen to me! I am whining about how hard this is for me when she is the one suffering! How pathetic is that? Maybe I should stick to Oghren's advice and drink more wine to make me whine less.

I try to pray to the Maker but all I can come up with is: Why?
Rori has been in my prayers forever. Hasn't He been listening? Was begging Him to keep her safe too much? I am downright angry with Him at that moment, feeling guilty at the same time for my blasphemous thoughts.

Blast it! I toss and turn more than Rori does and there's no way, sleep is going to come for me anytime soon. For now I do need some fresh air to clear my mind. I feel bad for leaving Rori alone but at least her faithful mabari watches over her.

The camp is fast asleep but for the guards on their watch - and Shale of course. The groans of the dying Dalish soldiers, all infected with the same curse as Rori, chill me to the bone. So do the distant howls of wolves, echoing through the night.

I find Fenarel sitting at one of the campfires with his shoulders slumped and his head hung low. He looks like a broken man the way he stares into the flames, his expression blank and oh so tired. Pol is seated across of him, hiding in the shadows. He is rocking to and fro as he cries silently.

"Nine months," Fenarel croaks when he gets aware of me standing there and gawking foolishly while I try to decide if I should offer some comfort. "For nine months Lyna fought the taint. She refused to die. She said she would find a cure. When anybody else had given up, Lyna still insisted she would live. She was too stubborn to die." He swallows hard when his voice threatens to break from the grief that shakes his slim frame. "We came here with her because... because she hoped..." He inhales deeply, trying to stop the tears from flowing, but fails. "There was no cure to be found for her. There was never a chance. She fought so bravely and in the end, she still died."

I don't know what to say. I'm incredibly bad at finding the right words for comfort. All I can think about is how much Lyna reminds me of Rori. That stubbornness, combined with determination and an inner strength that one would never expect in such a small and delicate woman. They both have... that fire burning inside of them. Now one of them is dead and the other one is infected with a deadly curse.

Rori refuses to accept that the curse could kill her. Sure, she has survived the Joining, but this is something different. In case she doesn't die, she'll become a monster, a wild uncontrollable beast driven by nothing but instinct. She will not be able to distinguish between friend and foe...

Oh merciful Andraste, what am I going to do?

How could I even leave her alone for that short a time when time is something she is running out of?

My feet carry me back to our tent. I run as if my life depended on it, as if every second wasted was of vital importance. When I burst into our tent, I find Rori tossing and turning in her sleep. She's soaked in sweat and still shivering. Her whimpering is so heart breaking, Barkley whines with her, his huge head resting on his paws when he doesn't lick the sweat from her brow. I lay down next to her, pulling her against me. It's far from comfortable but I couldn't care less. She breathes my name over and over again as if it was an incantation while I cry with my face buried in her damp hair. Guilt and fear tear me apart. If I hadn't been mean to Morrigan, she wouldn't have ran away and Rori would not have been out there in the forest unarmed and unprotected when the werewolves attacked.

Oh Maker have mercy!

There has to be more I can do for her than just hold her when she's in pain. There has to be a way... Maybe I should stop feeling sorry for myself. Maybe I should stop crying when crying won't change anything. Maybe I for once should stand up and just do what has to be done. It's like Rori used to say, you cannot rely on anybody but yourself to make things right. She taught me to finally make my own decisions and stand up for myself. That probably means I can't stand there like a toddler, wail
and look... cute... until someone comes running to make things right.

Oh, bloody blast it! I should at least give it a try - for Rori's sake.

The next morning starts with Rori being violently sick inside of our tent. And right in front of it once she manages to crawl that far on hands and knees. To say she's in a bad mood is quite an understatement. She hisses, snaps, growls and snarls at everybody daring to cross her path, even after Morrigan's brews brought her back to her feet. Despite the condition she's in, Rori has us all in a hurry, us being Morrigan, Oghren, Zevran, Shale and I. And Barkley of course. She has me tell the others to stay behind at the Dalish camp, leaving it to me to make up excuses for excluding Leliana, Sten and Wynne from the mission. Rori is quite clear about it...

"Last thing I fucking need now is a bunch of religious fanatics, notorious do-gooders and smartass weirdos with a questionable philosophy giving me shit."

... but I doubt it's wise to give that explanation to the bard, the granny mage and the Qunari. It's as awesome a task as being made the message boy by the Revered Mother ages ago in Ostagar.

"Oh, don't bother. Just tell them they stay behind. End of discussion," Rori growls, before turning to the companions she has chosen to accompany her. "I'm infected. You cannot handle that, get lost," she barks. "Being nice and understanding is not on my fucking agenda today - or any other day. You can't cope with this, leave. I got no fucking time to waste on you behaving like bloody mimosas." She already starts marching off into the forest as she talks, expecting us to follow. She really doesn't dawdle. Obediently we all trudge behind. If we had tails we'd all tuck them between our legs now.

"The mission is to end that blasted curse. Should I change into a werewolf before it is completed, Alistair will take the lead. You got a problem with that, fuck off now."

"Ahh, she makes me all randy when she's like that," Oghren groans, stuffing his hand into his pants and adjusting... all those... things there.

Ewww!

"Reminds you of your wife, doesn't she, my sturdy little friend?" Zevran chuckles.

"Aye," Oghren leers, smacking his lips. He is so busy ogling Rori's hind quarters, he keeps toppling over roots and rocks.

I clear my throat to get their attention. "You are talking about my woman, you know?"

"More like your bitch," the dwarf snickers.

"Doing it doggy-style gets a whole new meaning now, doesn't it, Alistair, my dear friend?" Zevran chuckles and nudges my rips.

"Could you two please stop that? That's... private," I mutter all flustered. My ears are glowing pink.

"Oh, don't worry, son! We're going to help that lame dog over the stile." Oghren grunts, patting my back. He has learnt by now to reach up as high as possible. When he began travelling with us, being used to dwarven heights, he used to accidentally smack Zevran's or my hindquarters. Thankfully he quickly adjusted to us being taller than dwarves. He hasn't yet come to adjust to the ladies' heights, though...

"Yes, she does hold the wolf by the ears but I would say there's more than a dog's chance for her," Zevran adds, grinning broadly. "She has always been rather dogged."
"You know the old saying: There's life in the old dog yet," Oghren comments cheerfully.

"Next to make a smart comment including dogs, hounds, puppies or wolves, I will stick the dog on!" Rori barks from the front of our single file row.

"Is she talking about the mabari or herself?" Zevran asks nervously.

"Do you really want to find out?" I mutter.

There are no paths leading through the old-growth forest. Trees lie as they have fallen, covered with moss and fungi. We have left the horses back at the Dalish camp, travelling on foot proves faster in this wild environment.

First Rori seems fine. We move as quickly as possible, run into some werewolves, but none of them being a white one, and she handles herself well in battle. Around midday, however Rori stumbles more than she walks. She claims she needs no rest but the way she winces or leans against tree trunks, it's quite obvious she is in pain. Her temper is explosive and only held at bay by her deteriorating condition. In the afternoon she has trouble staying on her feet and every now and then she just topples over, vomiting violently. The fits don't even stop when there's nothing left for her to get rid of.

"I need another potion," Rori croaks, wiping her mouth clean. She's crouching on the ground, unable to get back to her feet. I attempt to give her a hand but she slaps it away, snarling at me. She's a complete mess, eyes bloodshot, damp hair glued to her forehead.

"You can only have the next one in two hours," Morrigan informs her calmly. All day long everybody at some point expressed their sympathy for Rori - not that she took our support kindly. She threw a badly aimed stone at Oghren, kicked Zevran's shin, punched Shale in the chest - which left her with bleeding knuckles -, cursed at me, and shouted at Barkley... well, you get the impression. Morrigan stayed cool and distant as if she didn't care at all.

"No! I need it now!" Rori screams, pulling herself up right by clinging to a nearby tree. Foam's forming in front of her mouth as if she was rabid.

"It would kill you," Morrigan replies.

The words have hardly left her mouth when Rori throws herself at the witch, screaming bloody murder. I try to yank her back but she just drags me along as if I was a ragdoll. Zevran clings to her left arm, Oghren to her legs; I dangle from her right arm... Barkley jumps around us, barking loudly in his confusion as what to make of this situation. Howling madly, Rori fights against us like a berserk, shaking us off one after another. If not for Shale, I do not know if we had managed to stop Rori from tearing the witch to pieces. The golem just grabs her by her collar and lifts her off the ground. Dangling there in the golem's grip, she hisses and spits, curses and screams, kicks and squirms until she's so spent, she's close to fainting.

Unfortunately for her she does not faint. So for the next ten minutes we listen to her screaming in agony. That's when I've had enough. It's more than I can endure to see her suffer like that.

"Maker, just give her that potion!" I shout at Morrigan. I'm close to tears myself.

"Didn't you listen? It would kill her."

"But there has to be something we can do!" Now I am crying, and - blast it! - I really don't care what anybody thinks about me.
"We could knock her out," Zevran suggests. And that's just what we do. Well, the elf does it with one swift blow to the side of her neck.

We set up camp close to a small brook. We've not brought any tents so it's just us, our bedrolls and a campfire. I go to fetch water to at least wipe Rori's face clean and cool her heated skin. Upon returning I find Zevran tying her ankles and wrists.

"What in the name of the Maker do you think you're doing?" I bellow at him. He holds up his hands in defence when I am about to throw the pot at him I used to fetch the water.

"Alistair, my friend, Rori is a danger to us and to herself. She is uncontrollable and we have to take precautions for when she will turn."

"And you think those bonds will stop her?" Oghren grunts.

"No, my sturdy little friend, but they might buy us some time."

"The first Grey Warden is very ill. Shouldn't she return to the camp? The elderly mage could take care of her," Shale wonders. Rori is the one and only of all of us who the golem does not refer to as 'it'.

"And leave her with those pathetic elves?" Morrigan snorts as she instils the potion Rori has been asking for into her by carefully lifting her head and holding the vial to her lips.

"Zathrian would kill her as soon as she changes," I protest. I do not want to leave her alone or waste any moment without her - although she's being a pest and I have to watch her fading away. "Didn't you hear what he said about killing his own people before they turned into something monstrous? What does he care about Rori?"

"There's something rotten about this curse," Zevran adds thoughtfully. "I cannot say what it is, but something about Zathrian is fishy. I've talked to a man whose wife got infected. Zathrian claimed she died but wouldn't let him see her corpse. It doesn't make any sense. And this curse..." The elf shakes his head. "I can't get rid of the feeling Zathrian doesn't tell us the whole truth."

"If we keep her around, what do we do when the gal changes?" Oghren asks, turning to me. "You're the boss, that's what she said. So, boss, how do we make sure she doesn't tear us all apart?"

That is a mighty good question.

And I so do not want to hear it.

Because I really do not know the answer.

How do we stop the beast she will become without killing her and without risking our own lives? Can we break the curse before Rori's transformation? How much time does she have left?

Oh Maker!

"Are you saying we should kill her?" I snap at the dwarf.

"Alistair, my dear friend, Rori chose us to follow her for a reason. Because she knows, we will try anything to keep her alive," Zevran says soothingly. "Kind of a plan how to avoid killing her would be helpful, though."

"Break that curse before she changes?" I suggest tiredly. "Or go to the dogs while trying?"
I don't have a plan. I don't even know where to start looking for Witherfang. This forest is huge and we have not met any white wolves yet. I need someone to tell me what to do but there is nobody there and Rori relies on me...

I know Rori has been in situations like this. When she had us all search for Branka or when she decided to save Connor with the help of the mages. Also when we set out to find the urn of the sacred ashes...

I slump down next to Rori and brush her damp hair from her forehead. She opens her eyes, two dark and hazy orbs, the pupils dilated, and smiles sadly at me.

"You're awake," I gasp, hurrying to untie the bonds around her wrists. "Do you need something? Water? Food? How do you feel?"

She pulls her hands away from me, stopping my attempt to free her. "Zev's right," she whispers hoarsely. "Those ropes won't stop me but they will buy you time."

"You heard us," I breathe, helping her to sit up as it doesn't prove easy to do so with her hands tied together. I can't stand seeing her like that. It tears me apart inside. Probably better, though, than being torn apart from the outside... She's much calmer now she has gotten her next shot but Morrigan warned us the periods will get shorter and shorter. For that very brief moment when she neither curses nor sweats nor vomits her guts out... I can hold her and try to pretend everything's going to be alright. I fail miserably, though. And instead of supporting her, I am bawling my eyes out about how horrible it is to watch her suffer - and she is comforting me.

Maker, I am such a loser!

"Oh, Rori... what should I do? I cannot lose you... Blast! Look at me... what a mess... I am so sorry... I should be strong for you... but I am so afraid of losing you..."

And she of course is not afraid at all! She's only about to either die or turn into a blasted werewolf... so sure, keep wailing and tell her how tough this is for you!

Awesome, Alistair, truly awesome!

Rori makes it even worse by gently kissing my tears away. I almost wish the effect of her potion would fade as she would bark at me then and call me a whining sissy and a complete failure. She’s got a point there if you ask my opinion.

Blast it!

Angrily I wipe my nose at my sleeve, causing Rori to laugh.

"Hey, I got a handkerchief in my pocket. Feel free to use it. It's one of yours anyway."

"You are such a brave woman," I mutter after having fished the handkerchief from her pocket. It is indeed one of mine.

"I am not. Right now I am so high on whatever it is Morrigan mixes for me, I don't care about anything at all. But when the effect of the drug wears off..." She shrugs casually. "These are the only clear moments I have left. And they become less. Everything else is just... like wading through a red fog of fury and hatred... I am dangerous. I could kill all of you or doom you to endure the same fate. Yet here you are, being brave. And hey, it's nice to know you'd be missing me if I was gone. Makes
me feel loved." She pauses and I can almost feel the change of her mood, the way her body tenses and her expression tightens. "Now stop bawling, you cry baby. That fucking curse won't break itself."

The effect of the drug is already fading. I still stay with her that night and hold her. I will not leave her alone in her misery. I am here for her, no matter how much she snarls and bitches and threatens me...

Barking dogs never bite.

Right?
Next to our makeshift camp, a waterfall thunders down a cliff. In the bright morning light, little rainbows stretch across the water. The birds sing, a soft breeze rustles the leaves of the trees... It is so beautiful and peaceful - and thus a stark contrast to Rori's miserable form crouching on one of the boulders near the water. She's deadly pale with bright reddish blotsches on her cheeks, her eyes feverish and hazy. Angrily she tears a blade of grass to tiny pieces. It's incredible how she endures and never complains about her fate but moves on with determination.

"You are so brave. I am proud of you," I say in a low, calm voice once I'm done shaving. Considering Rori's condition I think it wise to not let her get hold of a razor. I wish I could hug her but touching her has become very unwise as well. So I just sit down a few feet away from her, avoiding quick movements or smiling at her broadly. Showing all your teeth to a woman who has developed a whole lot of canine habits is not a bright idea.

"There's nothing brave about me, nothing to be proud of," she snaps, furiously wiping the sweat of her brow. "If I was brave, I'd walk into that forest alone and face my fate. But here I am dragging you all along, endangering you to suffer the same. I am no more than a selfish coward."

"Don't say that...," I protest but she won't let me argue with her.

"Why not?" Rori says forcefully with tears welling up in her eyes and her fists clenched at her sides. "It's true... I'm terrified of dying, terrified of what I am about to become. I do not want to lose you..." Her voice trails off and is replaced by a low growl. Lifting her head as if she was alarmed, Rori slips from the rock and reaches for her weapons. Barkley begins to bark at the same time, snarling at three figures, having appeared on a flat broad rock in the middle of the creek half hidden by the mist of spraying water.

Werewolves. One of them a great white one.

Finally.

"Why don't they attack?" Zevran asks, frowning into the direction of the beasts. "All the others attacked on sight. These look as if they are... waiting for us."

We all gather at the shore, looking across the water at the assembled beasts. They still do not make any attempt to attack us, although their body language tells how tense they are.

I would have never thought being forced to sleep in the kennels with the dogs for years, whenever Eamon visited Denerim, would come in handy some day. You cannot spend that much time around dogs without learning some things about them.

"Shall I crush their heads?" Shale asks gloomily, punching her palm with her fist repeatedly.

"Their behaviour is strange," Morrigan agrees with the elf. As a shape shifter she knows a lot about the body language and behaviour of animals. At least that's what Rori told me. My conversations with the witch never run that deep as to truly exchange information apart from her reminding me what a fool I am. "What does our new leader intend to do now?"

"I intend to send the witch over the bridge first and see if the wolves bite her head off," I reply and get rewarded with a disgusted noise.

"I could go," Rori suggests. She has only taken her potion a short while ago and is already trembling
with the effort to stay on her feet. "They can't infect me twice, right?"

When I look across the water, the white wolf inclines its head, a gesture so human, it makes me shudder. It's so easy to forget those beasts have once been humans when there is nothing human left in their appearance and - usually - their behaviour.

It's time for a decision.

"Keep your weapons sheathed, stay behind," I order, holding out a hand to my companions to have them keep their distance.

"Alistair, my dear friend, do you really think this is a good idea?" Zevran squeaks as his attempts of nonchalance for once fail completely.

"I know what I am doing," I assure him.

"Twould be a premier," Morrigan mutters.

On slowly approaching the werewolves, I make sure I don't look them right in the eyes as not to give them any reason for attacking me when I clearly trespass their territory. I stop just out of their reach.

"Err... hello?" I say as calmly, lowly and firmly as possible. It doesn't sound very convincing. With much effort I refrain from offering a foolish grin and thus showing too much teeth.

The white wolf, obviously the alpha, cocks its head to one side as it scrutinizes me. I begin to sweat.

"Hrrr... the watch-wolves have spoken truly, my brothers and sisters," the white werewolf growls in a guttural voice. The sound makes me jump and for a moment I forget that one doesn't look an aggressive dog straight in the eyes.

"Wh..what?" Rori gasps behind me and next she's standing in that space between her human companions and the werewolves.

The werewolf ignores her, having identified me as the alpha of the - mostly - human group. That's somewhat... unexpected. I mean, me being seen as the leader of... anything. Usually people don't even trust me to lead myself. "The Dalish send a human, of all things, to repay us for our attack, to put us in our place." The huge beast snorts. "What bitter irony."

"Wait!" Rori breathes, taking another step closer. I am tempted to yank her back and only refrain because I fear the sudden movement could cause the werewolves to attack. "You... you speak!? I... I thought werewolves were savage beasts?"

The white wolf, Swiftrunner, as he calls himself, finally cares to take notice of her. "We are beasts but we are no longer simple and mindless, let that thought chill your spine."

Rori doesn't look chilled in any way, actually for the first time in days there's a glint of hope in her eyes. She almost seems giddy, even smiles at me and for a moment no longer than a heartbeat, she's just Rori again.

"Do all werewolves have this ability?" she asks excitedly, hopefully... but gets cut short by the werewolf who seems confused by having to talk to a minor member of my... err... pack.

"We will not talk to any minions of the Dalish," he snarls at her.

"We are no servants of the Dalish," I say calmly.
First place we are trying to help Rori... and make the Dalish stay true to the promise they gave by signing that treaty. I have to remind myself that ending the Blight is what I am here for. Rori's condition shouldn't have any influence on my decisions... and yet... I am not going to sacrifice her! Oh Maker, now I get what Wynne and Morrigan were hinting at... a decision I could have to make... a decision I am not prepared for...

Rori has never let one of her companions down. And none of them ever wasted a single thought about being selfish. Not Morrigan when she asked Rori to help her slay her mother, the infamous Flemeth. Not Leliana when she dragged Rori along to solve her Marjolaine problem. Not Shale when she expected Rori to walk yet deeper into the Deep Roads to find out more about her past. Not I when she went to fight a whole tower crammed with abominations, bloodmages and demons to save a boy that means nothing to her but so much to me.

"Do you take us for fools," the white werewolf growls. "We know you come from their camp. No doubt the old keeper himself sent you."

Can't deny that, can I? I am tempted to tell Swiftrunner about Rori's infection and ask him for help. However, we do not know enough of him or his motives and our desperate search for a cure could make us the perfect puppets for any manipulative attempt.

"Why do you hate the Dalish so much?" I ask carefully.

"You know nothing, do you?" Swiftrunner barks with contempt. "Nothing of us and even less about those you serve. You are a fool and we are done talking. Run from the forest while you can. Run to the Dalish and tell them they are doomed."

Oh, wow, he's quite dramatic, isn't he?

"We can agree on the part with the fool," I say, biting my lips as not to grin stupidly. The next words I choose carefully. If killing Witherfang is the only way to break this curse, then I will gladly complete this mission like Zathrian told us. That means a confrontation with the other werewolves couldn't be avoided. Right now, however... Zevran said there was something rotten about the keeper's story... I believe he is right; there is indeed something awfully wrong here. Talking werewolves? Who has ever heard of that? It's something to take into consideration, isn't it? Just bashing in their heads now seems... quite a foolish thing to do. If I take the wrong path I could lose Rori forever... "The rest... sorry, no way. I do not wish to fight but neither can I retreat."

"I do not wish to fight you either," Swiftrunner growls - it's a rather unexpected reply, considering he's a werewolf. "But we cannot trust you. Come, brothers and sisters, let us retreat. The forest has eyes of its own, and it will deal with intruders as it always has."

As soon as the werewolves disappear between the trees, Barkley announces the approach of yet another group. With him wagging his tail and bouncing around giddily, it's not that big a surprise to see Wynne, Sten and Leliana arrive only a minute later. Barkley pounces the Qunari, greeting him with the exuberance of a dog expecting a treat. Rori isn't as delighted. Out of the corner of my eyes I notice her retreat to stand behind Shale.

"We finally found you," Wynne greets us. She's visibly relieved, as if she was afraid she wouldn’t find us at all or... I don't know... dead? "Where is Rori?"

"I thought, Rori explicitly told you to stay back in the Dalish Camp," I say, ignoring her question as I am not sure what to make of this situation. Rori is nowhere to be seen. Neither is Morrigan.

"Alistair, she might have fooled you about her illness but the symptoms were not to be mistaken for
anything but the infection caused by the bite of a werewolf," Wynne informs me in the soothing and educational tone adults use when explaining unpleasant things to small children. She even takes my hands in hers and gives them a sympathetic squeeze.

"What are you doing here?" I demand to know. I'm not sure why, but I am beginning to get rather angry. Sten is craning his neck, looking around for Rori. Just she's not there.

"We came to warn you, of course," Wynne lectures me. "Rori is ill, terribly ill. She will either die or turn into a werewolf. You are aware of that, aren't you, Alistair?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then you do know what you have to do?"

"Pardon?"

"Alistair, you and Rori are the last two Grey Wardens in Ferelden. You have a responsibility that comes with being a Grey Warden. It is your duty to protect and serve the people and thus you might be forced to make a sacrifice..."

"Well, Rori is not here," I snap, cutting Wynne short before she can leap into another endless monologue. Usually Rori is the recipient of those lectures. Now she is gone - and Maker, I do hope she stays away! - Wynne only has me left to concentrate on. It's not that I didn't have the same thoughts already - and felt like a complete prick even thinking about that possibility - but it is quite a difference if it's me and my own conscience or if someone is trying to push me into a direction. There was a time when I'd have just nodded and obediently done like I was told, no matter how much it hurt me. I have to admit, it used to be easier that way - but it made me terribly unhappy. I do not want to be unhappy and as Rori is the main reason for my happiness, I will not give her up easily. "She left... just wasn't there anymore when we woke this morning," I lie, hoping that my bright red ears won't give me away. Wynne mistakes me avoiding looking her in the eyes as a sign of sadness and I find myself hugged to her grandmotherly bosom... err... help? Someone, please?

"I saw the first Grey Warden disappear between the trees in the middle of the night," Shale drones. She, of course, doesn't blush. "I thought, it would release some of its smelly liquids and then return. But it never came back."

"Oh, I am sorry, Alistair," Wynne sighs, finally releasing me. "But it's better this way, believe me. Let us hope that she dies a quick death. It would be a mercy. She doesn't deserve to suffer. I so wish we could have done something for her."

Hello?! Rori isn't dead yet!

"I will pray for her," Leliana says solemnly. "Rori is not a religious person, but I will ask the Maker to look over her nonetheless. She will need all the divine support she can get. I can't believe she is gone." The bard dries the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief. "Perhaps when we break that curse... her fate is in the hands of the Maker now."

Thankfully it's more likely in Rori's own hands. She won't sit down and rely on the Maker - or anybody else.

"Where is the witch?" Sten asks as grumpily as always.

"Morrigan left, too, after getting into a fight with Alistair," Zevran lies smoothly. No blushing there. I am actually the only one with a face as red as a tomato.
"She's no loss," the Qunari grunts. "Let's go and find this Witherfang." He marches off into the direction where Swiftrunner disappeared, obviously expecting us to follow his lead.

I begin to understand why Rori left those three behind.

I clear my throat loud enough to catch the Qunari's attention. "Excuse me, please, but I am the leader of this group."

I cannot allow Sten to take the lead - he is likely to murder Rori on first sight because of his so called honour. I don't say it wouldn't hurt him. He has come to like Rori. But I have absolutely no doubt, Sten would sacrifice her without a second thought if he believed it necessary to complete his mission.

"What makes you think so?" Sten challengingly approaches me to tower over me. I've seen him challenge Rori the same way before. She never backed down and neither will I.

"Well, I am the only Grey Warden left...," I stammer, wincing when Sten scrutinizes me with a look that tells me he doubts I could take a walk in the park without getting lost. "And... this is my mission, my responsibility. So, we are going to do this my way."

"Alistair, my dear boy, are you sure you can do this?" Wynne backstabs me with grandmotherly concern. "You could be forced to fight against your beloved if she turned. Witherfang is the leader of the werewolves. She would protect him as do the others, should she become one of them."

"I have a templar's training," I snarl rather unnerved. "I don't see that there's much of a difference between a templar's readiness to slay any mage that has turned into an abomination and this situation here. I can very well exercise my duties." That is another blunt lie. I am utterly terrified of the scenario Wynne describes. All I can do is hope that it will never happen.

"Ah. Yep. Lot of tension around here," Oghren mutters next to me as we move on. Sten has decided not to stomp me into the ground for now. He probably only waits for my first major failure in leadership, but for now I am in charge.

"You think so, do you?" I sigh while I keep looking around for any sign of Rori or Morrigan. Barkley has disappeared, too. Maker, I do hope Rori is alright - as alright as she can be when she's about to turn into a werewolf anytime soon. If she became like Swiftrunner... she would be able to keep control over herself, wouldn't she?

"Know what I do to relieve tension?" Oghren goes on when I already thought my obvious disinterest would shut him up.

"I hesitate to wonder."

"I polish the ol' weapon," Oghren explains enthusiastically and not at all discouraged by my taciturn manners.

"Really."

"Yep. Give it a good shine. With a dry rag, then with a little grease."

Grease? Polish? The old weapon? Give it a shine? Oh no! No! No! The last thing I want to hear about now is Oghren and his... old weapon. "That's disgusting."

"You're telling me you never gave yer blade the old spit-shine?"

"I think that's private," I mumble all flustered and utterly embarrassed. The images popping up in my
mind... all those nights in the Chantry when I lay alone in my bed, hardly daring to move and afraid anybody could identify the treacherous noises as what they were... that one time when Rori touched herself for me to watch... and I was beating my meat right in front of her... It seems ages ago... in times happier than they are now... Maker's Breath, how I miss her!

And no! I don't miss her only because of all the... lamppost-licking and weapon-polishing! I mean... I do miss that, too... but that's not the reason... oh, blast! Let's just say I miss her like crazy... for everything she is... was... whatever...

"Really? Sodding Chantry and its rules. I like to do it right out in the open," the dwarf grunts.

"Where people can see you?" I squeak in mere disbelief. This dwarf is so... he's so... ewww... now my treacherous mind is showing me Oghren unpacking his... old weapon... and... No! Stop! Stop! Things I so do not want to imagine!

"Yep." Oghren says matter-of-factly and pats the hilt of his axe before running his fingers carefully across the blade.

Err...

One moment...

"Wait, what are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about?" Oghren retorts, arching his bushy eyebrows at me.

"Never mind," I sigh. There are enough trees around here. I only refrain from banging my head against one because I believe it could damage my reputation as a leader. For the rest of the day we keep searching for the werewolves but all we come across are some darkspawn, one rhyming oak, many hopping mad trees, the camp of a murderous spirit... really nothing out of the ordinary. At least I'm kept so busy, I don't have much time to worry about Rori.

In the middle of the night I wake from Barkley nudging me and drooling all over my face.

"Ew! Get away from me you flea-infested furball!!" I try to shove him back but he won't back off. He whines and whimpers so heartbreakingly that I finally sit up, rubbing my eyes tiredly. I'm still half asleep. "Can't you pester Rori? You're her mabari... err... where is she?" Now I'm wide awake. It's as if someone has emptied a bucket of icy water over my head when the memory returns to me. Rori has disappeared into the forest this morning... and Barkley with her... The dog begins to pull at my shirt. "You... want me to follow you?"

Barkley cocks his head to one side, looking at me as if he thought me to be a complete retard. Shortly later I stumble after the mabari through the dark forest, trying to keep up with him. When I finally arrive at the entrance of a cave half hidden by the roots of ancient trees, I am soaked with sweat and panting heavily.

Morrigan awaits me, the light radiating off her staff pours its ghostly light over her tired face. "She wants to see you," the witch greets me, and then disappears inside the cave, expecting me to follow.

Rori is crouched on the ground at the far end of the narrow cave. She rocks too and fro, hugging herself. Her teeth are bared, eyes wide and terrified. Forgetting all caution, I hurry to embrace her - and she lunges at me, snapping her teeth at me as she goes for my throat.
I let myself fall backwards and crawl away from her as she retreats to her corner, whimpering lowly.

"Ro-rori?" I ask timidly. It's heart breaking to see her like that. I thought I'd be used to her suffering by now, that it couldn't get much worse. Boy was I wrong. I will never get used to her agony.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Rori mutters, reaching out to me, then retreats as if she burnt her hand. Sweat is pouring down her face, her hair is damp. Then she topples over, falling down to her knees as she is violently sick. When I attempt to help her, she weakly swats at my hand, shooing me away. The way her body spasms, that tormented sound of convulsion coming from her throat, it's as if she was turned inside out. Panting and whimpering, she collapses on the ground right next to her own vomit. With much effort she rolls around so that she can look at me. "I love you," she whispers, then another seizure shakes her delicate frame. I kneel beside her to take her hand. This time she doesn't pull away.

"I love you, too." My voice doesn't sound like my own. It's choked by my effort to hold back my tears. I do not want her to see me cry.

"I'd step back if I were you," Morrigan says from behind. "It's time."

"Time? What time?" I croak stupidly.

"The transformation cannot be stopped any longer."

"The trans... oh Maker!" I do not want to let go of Rori's hand but when the next seizure shakes her, she almost breaks my hand, squeezing it with a strength that is beyond human.

"Here, this will ease the pain." The witch holds a vial to Rori's lips, helping her drink. Then she quickly steps back and summons a transparent, lightly shining wall to form around Rori, much like the prison Cullen was caught in.

After that all we can do, is watch.

Somehow I imagined the transformation would be somewhat like Morrigan's shape shifting. Some lurid light, some white fog, the crackling of magic at work and Poof! When the fog clears there's an animal where the witch stood before.

Well, the transformation is nothing like that. It is... terrible.

Rori writhes on the ground, her whole body spasms violently, and even over her screams I can hear the sound of breaking bones and torn skin. Splatters of blood hit me in the face when her skull, arms, legs... everything is deformed, shaped into something monstrous. It doesn't take long but to me it seems an eternity. I'm on my knees, crying. Someone shouts at Morrigan to fucking dim her light... guess, that's me. Finally Rori's screams stop as she loses consciousness.

Where my beloved woman has been, there now lies a beast covered in red fur the same colour as her hair used to be.

I do understand now why Zathrian would rather kill his people than to make them endure this torture. But Rori survived and when - after some hours - she begins to move again and turns her dark blue eyes on me and Morrigan, there's recognition there next to confusion and fear.

I kneel down, turning my face to the side as to avoid looking her straight in the eyes, then I begin to talk to her. It's not easy to make my voice sound calm, when sobs still threaten to shake me whenever I look at her. Hard to keep it low, when all I want to do is scream. Almost impossible to sound firm when I've never felt weaker before. I give it a try anyway... and slowly the werewolf crawls closer,
whining lowly as she watches us carefully.

I keep talking to her. "Good girl, Rori, yes, don't be afraid of us. We do not mean to harm you. Yeah, you're such a beautiful girl, such a good girl..."

"Alistair," the beast growls - and I swear she pouts. It looks extremely creepy, though. "Stop talking to me as if I was a dog!"

"Err... but you are...," I stammer, all flustered. Her voice sounds alien, guttural, and still I can hear it's Rori. "Uhm, sorry... but you are a... werewolf."

"I am, ain't I?" Rori gasps as she examines her paws. All of a sudden she begins to yelp short barks. It takes me a while to realize, she is laughing... laughing so hard actually that she rolls around on the ground.

"What is so funny?"

"The Couslands have... they are...," Rori barks in between her fits of laughter. "The Couslands became teyrs for their victory over the werewolves... now the last of the Couslands has turned into a werewolf... you have to admit, that's quite ironic!"

"At least you can see the funny side of it," Morrigan remarks. She drops her spell and the werewolf approaches us slowly on all fours. She sniffs at me and it takes me all the willpower I can find inside of me as not to wince. I have to remind myself that this beast that carefully nudges my side with her snout is Rori. Then she licks my face like Barkley has done so often.

"Eww." I shudder and wipe my face clean. "Werewolf slobber."

Rori cocks her head to one side and grins, her ears are twitching and she looks utterly pleased with herself when she licks my face again right after I wiped it clean. Then she drops her large head in my lap and whines until I scratch her behind the ears and pet her fur.

"And... what are we going to do now?" I ask. This is all so horrible, I think, I'm in shock... and yet I find myself smiling when Rori rolls on her back to have me scratch her belly. Even as a werewolf, she is cute... well, as cute as such a beast can be... which is, I admit, nothing to get excited about. I am simply relieved to see she is still herself... somehow... She just got reshaped...

"Now, we are going to use this to our advantage," Rori growls. That's just typical. She turns into a monster and next she makes plans of how to get what she wants by making use of her new appearance. I guess it helps her to keep herself busy. What else is there for her but to despair or to fight? It helps me, too, as I am close to despairing myself. She scratches herself behind the ear with her hind-leg, then starts pacing the cave.

"We suspect there's more to this curse than Zathrian told us. Swiftrunner gave us a hint but nothing more," Rori growls.

"He could try to use us as a tool," I point out.

"Same with Zathrian," Morrigan remarks.

"That's why we have to find out the truth," Rori insists.

"But how when nobody wants to talk to us?"

"Swiftrunner doesn't trust us because we work for the Dalish," Rori muses. "But now I am one of
them. Maybe I can find out why the werewolves hate the Dalish so much while you find out what Zathrian is hiding from us. Most important, I could find their lair."

"You want to go to the werewolves? All alone?" I cry out. "They will kill you!"

"She won't be alone," Morrigan says matter-of-factly. A bit of lurid light, some fog, the crackling of magic and Poof! Morrigan is a werewolf.

"Oh, wow, that's the trick," Rori remarks dryly. "Someone should have told me."

"It's still a crazy plan," I protest sullenly. I don't feel any better with Rori joining the pack of the werewolves now Morrigan is with her. I wish I could be with her instead.

"And that's why it will work," Rori barks, licking my face once more.

"Ewww... really, we have to turn you back into a human soon. I'm not too fond of these wet slobbering kisses."

The night is already turning grey when the two werewolves, one red, one black, one real, one fake, disappear into the forest.

I stand there until the sky is lit with orange and pink and the sun rises in all its glory, bathing me in its warmth and light. It's somewhat comforting that even the darkest night will end. You only have to survive it.
Running with the Pack

All I get from Zathrian is... a lot of pigeon crap. At least that's what Shale calls it. I still decline her offer to have her stomp on his foot and see if he changes his mind about not knowing why the werewolves hate the Dalish so much. It's tempting, though. Even more since Sten breathes down my neck and carps about everything I say or do, calling it a waste of time. Why talk to the Dalish and find out more about the curse if we could be out there and slay Witherfang? My temper isn't any better than Rori's was during her last days. I've been trying to be nice. I've been trying to explain my decisions but enough is enough.

"Nobody has asked for your opinion!" I snarl at the Qunari before I can even think twice. Not that I do that often. Think twice... or think at all before acting... at least that's what Morrigan keeps saying... I think, I think too much, although I prefer if others do the thinking for me... There you go, already a lot of thinking done... Back to Sten glaring icily at me. "I give orders, you act under these orders. Nothing more, nothing less. It can't be that hard to understand!"

Why anybody would want to be a leader is totally beyond me. Even more now than before. I feel constantly overstressed and like a complete failure. I am sure that Rori would have squeezed every tiny detail out of Zathrian by now... just she's not here. She's out there running with the pack.

Strangely my outburst seems to impress Sten. I mean, that always grumpy and sour look on his face doesn't change a bit. But he grunts and nods slightly. I take it, that's approval. Whatever. At least he doesn't punch me straight in the face. That's something after all. I do like my nose like it is. My teeth are rather pretty, too. I would appreciate if I could keep them for some time longer.

Sten is not the only one getting on my nerves. Wynne keeps questioning my willingness to be a Grey Warden. Whatever I do, she reminds me this is about the Blight and not about saving Rori.

"I know this is hard. And I wish nothing more than saving Rori was possible, but are you sure, are you really sure, you still perform as a Grey Warden?" Wynne says when I lead my companions back into the forest. She's at my heels, trying to keep up with me as I set a hasty pace - as if I could run away from all this. Well, I can't. Wynne's still there and although she pants, it doesn't stop her from lecturing me.

"And are you sure, you'd nag Rori as much if she was here and had the same doubts I have about Zathrian's story?" I demand to know.

"She is not here, Alistair," Wynne reminds me soothingly.

As if I needed a reminder! I lie in my tent all alone at night and all I got left of my love is a pair of rainbow coloured striped socks and her Grey Warden amulet. The first I clutch in my hand, the second I wear around my neck next to my own. I use her pillow because it smells of her. But nothing, absolutely nothing can ease that aching in my chest that comes with the lonliness.

I try to steele myself for that one decision, should I have to make it... But for now I'd very much like to keep hoping. Some support would be nice, thank you.

"Rori has always tried to do the right thing, even if it meant taking the long and winding path instead of travelling down the broad road." I say as calmly as I can manage. I fail miserably. I practically snap at Wynne. "She didn't give Branka the anvil, although the smith could have created more golems with it to help us fight the darkspawn. She could have abandoned Redcliffe - why fight any undead and risk dying in that battle? She did save the mages - including you - because she didn't
want any innocent to die. She also could have allied with the templars and just killed everything alive in that tower - including you."

I talk myself into a rage, my voice becoming louder and louder and more aggressive with every word.

In the following silence, Wynne just cocks an eyebrow. "Did she bite you?" the granny mage then asks carefully.

I choose to ignore her. Instead I inhale deeply to calm myself down. It doesn't work. "W-what makes me so angry... so sad... and it's also disappointing," I stammer, wishing I wasn't looking like a kicked puppy. I'd rather look... grand... and... oh, I don't know... have poise... "If any of you suffered what Rori has to endure right now, she'd bend over backwards to save you."

It's true.

And they all know it.

From that moment on there's no more discussions, no more questioning my leadership. No more lecturing about my responsibility. And Zevran gives me thumbs up behind Wynne's back.

Now that this is solved, there's still the problem that I have absolutely no clue where to find Witherfang. So I run around the forest aimlessly with my rather silent companions in tow and try to appear competent. Not that the others know any better what to do now - well, maybe Sten. Or at least he believes he knows better... anyway, they are all - with the exception of Sten - as clueless as I am but because I am the leader, I'm the one responsible for our progress that is just not happening.

Actually, I do hope for Rori to return and tell me what to do. Instead we run into... Morrigan.

Nobody is delighted to see her. Well, I am... for about as long as it takes me to realize she is alone.

"Where's Rori?" I shout at her as soon as she has changed back to her human form. My voice sounds awfully shrill from the panic that takes hold of me when I see the witch without my woman... wolf... wolf-woman...

"She's with the werewolves..."

"And why are you here? You promised you wouldn't leave her alone! You nasty... treacherous... lying... witch!" I feel like throttling her. That's not new to me. I often feel like throttling her, but I swear, I've never been that close. I'm really not good at coping with having lost Rori... maybe for good. My face is bright red - for once from anger - and the veins at my temples are throbbing. I am so obviously mad, it causes Leliana, Wynne and Zevran to retreat and Sten to put his hand to the hilt of his sword. "She has not bitten me!" I snap at my companions.

The witch is the only one to stay utterly unimpressed.

"Witherfang at once knew I am none of her werewolves," Morrigan explains coolly. "She appeared in form of a great white wolf - but there's for sure more than meets the eye. She's not the bloodthirsty beast the keeper described. She took Rori in as a sister without hesitation. However, she wouldn't let me accompany Rori."

"Then... why didn't you bring her back here?" I stammer. "Why did you leave her with them?"

"Witherfang agreed to negotiate with Rori about the matters of the Dalish. So she went with the werewolves."
"But she's all alone!" Knowing Rori, I shouldn't be too worried. She managed to win over her companions to follow her into any battle. Even Sten. Morrigan calls her a sister. Zevran calls her the best friend he ever had. Shale has begun to address Rori with her name... sometimes... If anybody can talk a group of murderous bloodthirsty werewolves into becoming vegetarians and peace activists, it's probably Rori. Still... Maker, I feel so useless...

"She's not. Barkley is with her."

"He's only a dog!"

"I'd be more worried if she was with you, Alistair," Morrigan comments. "Now, what have you found out?"

"Nothing," I mutter compunctiously. Talk about feeling useless... I'm the personification of uselessness. Anybody looking up 'uselessness' in an encyclopaedia should find my image grinning foolishly at the spectator from that page.

"Now, that was to be expected, wasn't it?"

"And what have you found out?" I sigh, rubbing my forehead tiredly.

"I know where the lair of the werewolves is," Morrigan says matter-of-factly.

Of course.

The witch takes the lead and where I've felt awfully lost all day long, Morrigan is very sure of where she's going... until she suddenly stops, frowning in confusion.

"What...? Blood and damnation! We have to go back..."

"Did you lose your way?" Usually I'd sneer now and rub it in. Maker, how long have I been waiting for a moment like this! That one moment when Morrigan is not as über-smart as she always claims to be. And now here it is: Morrigan failing at finding her way through the woods... and I can't even laugh about it, because her failure means I cannot get to Rori. So instead of utterly enjoying the witch's error, I try to help her. "Did we miss a landmark?"

"Perhaps..." Confused Morrigan attempts to lead us back to where we came from. We all turn round... only to find that the path we've just walked on to be gone. It was only a narrow deer crossing but it for sure was there... where now there's a huge fir tree.

"Am I the only one who thinks this is strange and somewhat creepy?" I mutter.

"Sodding trees," Oghren grumbles, clutching his axe tighter. "I could solve that..."

Out of the corners of my eyes I see something moving, something white, an animal... then the fir tree rustles its branches... and it sounds kinda... angry. It also looks angry... and it shouldn't be rustling anything at all with no wind blowing... and then a branch just... swats at the dwarf... and next roots shoot out of the ground and wrap around Oghren's ankles, pulling his legs from under him. Next the roots drag him towards the fir tree... a huge gap opens beneath the tree as it... stands up... Leliana screams... Zevran grabs the first part of Oghren he can get hold of: the beard... Sten unsheathes his sword... Shale attempts to stomp onto the roots and is pulled off the ground when the branches of a willow wrap around her arms... Wynne prepares a spell...

"The forest deals with intruders as it always has," Morrigan says next to me. She's the only one staying calm, even when the fir tree... swallows Oghren and just slumps down again, closing that
hole it created. Her words chill me to the bone. I have heard them before...

"Stop!" I shout at the top of my voice. "Stop! We will leave you alone! We do not mean to harm the
forest or any of its inhabitants. Sten, put the sword down! Wynne, stay cool! Shale, stop pulling at
those branches!"

Reluctantly the Qunari obeys. The magic crackling around Wynne's hands fades and the golem
hangs from the tree like an oversized puppet on strings. None of them look happy.

"We are not here to harm Witherfang. And I'd appreciate if you didn't harm the dwarf and the
golem," I add, holding up my hands in a defensive gesture and to show I am unarmed. "We're only
looking for our friend. Her name is Rori..."

There's some rustling, like a whisper hushing in the branches... and something, someone answering...
it sounds neither like an animal nor like a human... the voice is calm and soothing, soft and yet firm...
it's almost like a song... for a heartbeat a huge white wolf appears between the trees and our eyes
meet... then it is gone as suddenly as it appeared.

Next Shale is dropped to the ground and Oghren is practically spat out from under the fir tree. The
roots retreat into the earth and with a lot of rustling of branches and leaves, the surrounding trees
make room for us, forming another path... that leads us directly back to the spot where we started to
look for Witherfang's lair.

"From now on... you can call me the tree-whisperer," I smirk at Morrigan.

"Just because for once you didn't bark up the wrong tree, that doesn't make you any less a fool," the
witch retorts.

So now we're exactly where we've been before. We know where the lair is but we cannot get
through and thus cannot get to Rori. I am beyond frustrated and find myself kicking small stones
around like Rori when she's upset. I totally get why she would do so. It's relieving a whole lot of
tension. And maybe I should give Oghren's relaxing methods a try later in camp... err... not what you
think!... Well... okay, maybe that, too...

The forest keeps leading us in circles for some more time until we are so thoroughly lost that we
couldn't find the lair of the werewolves anymore even if we were standing right in the middle of it.
At least we do find a werewolf, a single one crouching on the ground and writhing in pain.

"A trap?" Zevran asks next to me, frowning at the creature as it lifts its head at the sound of his
voice. We keep our distance and our hands close to our weapons but the beast doesn't attempt to
attack us. "Or is it hurt?"

I frown, shaking my head. "A trap doesn't make much sense. The forest could have done that
already, couldn't it?"

"P-please..." the werewolf calls out to us. Its voice is a deep growl and choked by its effort not to
cry out in agony. It lifts one paw towards us in a gesture so human, it chills me to the bone. "Help...
listen... I'm not the mindless beast that I appear to be."

"I know," I say soothingly. I slowly approach, watching my surroundings carefully, though. I have
to bite my lips as not to ask the creature at once about Rori. I do not want the werewolves to know
how much I care for her. They could use my love against me and then I would be forced to... decide.

"I am cursed, turned into this creature. The curse, it... it burns in me." Whining, the poor beast claws
at its own pelt. It is so obviously in pain, I can hardly bare to look at it... I thought the suffering
would end once the transformation was completed... Now I learn the torment goes on and on... and Rori has to endure it.

"Hold on, we will help you."

"There is... no help for me..."

"We at least can try. Morrigan, do you still have one of the potions you made for Rori?" I ask.
"Those that would ease her pain?"

"Do you really want to waste them on that one?" The witch clearly dislikes the idea but I don't give a damn. This werewolf is willing to talk to us. It could be our only chance to get more information. Shrugging, Morrigan reaches into her backpack and hands a tiny vial to me. "Now, I really want to see how you give this to it."

Oh... err... blast!

That I did not think about.

Now I stand there with a medicine for the poor creature... but as poor and miserable as it is, it still is a huge werewolf that could easily tear me to pieces and I have no intention to get too close to it. I doubt it can open the vial itself with those paws... Finally I have the idea to pour the liquid into Barkley's feeding dish.

"Thank you," the werewolf breathes once it has lapped up the potion. "I fled into the forest. The werewolves... they took me in, but I had to return. I had to," the creature whimpers. "You are human. I... I was once an elf, one of the Dalish folk... Do you know my clan?"

"Your keeper, Zathrian, is the one who sent us here," I say carefully.

"The keeper sent you? Then you seek Witherfang."

"What makes you think that?" I ask quickly. The mentioning of Zathrian's name makes this beast think of Witherfang at once... that's odd, isn't it?

"I know why you seek her but... there's no time to explain..."

"But I do need an explanation!"

"You must listen," the werewolf cuts me short, ignoring my plea. "My name is Danyla. My husband, he is called Athras. Please, you must bring him a message. Tell him, I love him, tell him... I am dead and with the gods. I beg you."

"And that's what she wastes her breath and our time on," Morrigan snorts. I glower at her, causing her to cross her arms in front of her chest and stick out her chin defiantly.

"I spoke to Athras. He worries about you." Zevran says softly.

"I want him to be in peace. He is a good man. Please do not... make him suffer, thinking of me."

"I will take your message to him, Danyla," the elf promises as he picks up the scarf she has dropped to bring back to her husband.

Smiling that creepy fully-toothed werewolf smile, Danyla for a very brief moment is at peace. It is shattered again by the agony of the curse that torments her mercilessly. "Ah, the pain. The curse... is fire in my blood. Please, end it for me and end it quickly."
"I need answers first," I cry. "Please, you must help me."

"I... I will tell you what I know... if you promise to end my pain."

Hesitating, I stare at the creature that has once been Danyla. She has already endured so much, too much. She deserves all my sympathy... and my mercy. If not for Rori, this decision would be easier to make. Rori wouldn't want this. Never. She'd rather die fighting the curse. But Danyla is not Rori... and the information she can give me... "I promise."

Danyla's expression, though that of a monstrous beast, is so full of gratitude and relief. "Then know this," she pants with much effort. "The werewolves are no longer violent animals. They have overcome the curse. Like I have."

Okay, we know that already.

"There's a ruin in the centre of the forest. You may find them there. They will think, you mean to kill them."

"But how do we get there? The forest won't let us through. What is the connection of Witherfang and Zathrian? How could the werewolves overcome the curse?"

"I can tell you no more," Danyla cries out as another seizure makes her spasm.

"Oh, shut up!" I snap at Morrigan when her face appears right in front of mine and she wears that expression that says: Told you so, you moron! "Danyla...," I address the werewolf one more time... only to find she's hardly capable of talking anymore.

"The pain! It is... too much... Please... fulfill... your promise," the werewolf wails, her screams becoming more and more animalistic.

Reluctantly, I draw my weapon...

"Alistair! No!"

The sword drops from my hand at the sound of that voice. "Rori!"

She's crouching on top of a boulder with Barkley. With one fluid movement she jumps to the ground, landing next to Danyla - on her side, not on ours. Warily she shifts her weight, all muscles tense beneath the thick soft fur that covers her misshapen body.

"Merciful Andraste!" Leliana gasps. She stumbles backwards at the sight of what Rori has become. I have to admit, her new self is not an improvement... although her red fur is rather pretty.

"Alistair, my dear friend, that rumour that Ferelden men cannot sleep without a dog in their bed..."

"Still not true," I snap.

"Aye, why not?" Oghren grunts. "She's a bit hairy, but I've seen uglier gals."

"Oh, you poor, poor dear!" Wynne cries out. "What has happened to you?"

Rori cocks her huge head to one side, regarding the granny mage as if she was trying to decide whether to bite or just ignore her.

"The first Grey Warden is taller now," Shale observes. "But still a flesh creature."
"The pain... You... you promised!" Danyla wails. She doesn't understand that this is somehow a family reunion. Or she doesn't care. Probably both. I wouldn't if I was her.

"Danyla, pull yourself together! The curse can be broken!" Rori barks, grabbing the other werewolf by her shoulders.

Maker, I am so glad Rori is taking matters into her hands... paws... I don't feel that killing Danyla is right. I'd rather save her, although I know sometimes it is better to put an end to the suffering. But if this curse can be broken... if she only could endure it a little longer... I do want to believe she can be saved, because I need a chance for Rori to survive all this and become human again.

"You don't know that! Zathrian will never... Witherfang won't... Argh! The pain... it... I cannot...!"

"If anybody can find a cure, then it's Rori," I try to calm Danyla down. She doesn't listen anymore, though. Howling madly, the werewolf throws herself at me. I stumble backwards and trip over a rock. While I still fumble around for my sword, Danyla lunges herself at me again... and is thrown aside by another huge body hitting hers.

Growling at each other, fangs bared, Danyla and Rori circle each other. There is nothing human left in them that moment. Danyla makes the first move and soon they are entangled into each other, rolling around on the ground. It's a huge furry ball of arms and legs that snarls and growls, barks and yelps. Rori really tries but it becomes obvious quickly she's not yet used to her new body. Danyla is in a frenzy. The pain drives her mad and she mindlessly beats her smaller and weaker opponent to a pulp.

The rest of us are forced to watch as it is impossible to interfere. The risk of hitting Rori is just too high. Barkley manages to jump on Danyla's back but she shakes him off, smashing him against a rock forcefully. Whimpering, the mabari collapses on the ground. Only when Danyla pushes Rori down, slamming her head onto the rocky ground, Shale grabs the grey werewolf from behind and lifts her off the heavily wounded red one. I dart forward to pull Rori away from the battleground quickly... Boy, is she heavy! Only with Zevran's help can I finally manage while the rest of our companions finish the raging werewolf.

"She was as weak as the rest of her people," Sten comments as he wipes his blade clean on Danyla's fur.

"You seem to have quite the disdainful attitude towards elves, my Qunari friend," Zevran observes.

"Don't take it personally, elf. I have a disdainful attitude towards everyone."

Rori also has a disdainful attitude... towards me. "You promised to kill her!" she breathes as she struggles to get back to her own feet and away from Zevran and me. Her wounds already begin to heal. "Why did you do that?"

"She begged me... she was in pain. She couldn't endure it anymore," I try to explain. "Does it hurt you, too? The curse... do you feel it like Danyla?"

"Why? Do you want to end my suffering like you ended hers?" she snaps.

"That's not... come on, Rori, this is not fair! I would never..." I don't finish that sentence. We both know it could turn out as a blunt lie. What if Zathrian is wrong and the curse cannot be broken? What if he lied to us?

"It was an act of mercy," Leliana says soothingly. "She is now with the Maker..."
"Is that the kind of mercy you plan on showing me, too?" Rori barks with all her teeth bared. She's really upset - and terribly afraid... of us. Crouching low, she backs away from the people she used to call her friends. I can see it in her eyes, how she begins to lose control over her humanity.

"Rori, please, we won't get anywhere if we start to argue with each other. We have to work together, okay?" I kneel down, avoiding eye contact as I keep talking to her. "I also made a promise to you, remember? That I would try anything to break that curse. I intend to keep that promise. But I do need your help, love."

Ducking her head, Rori crawls closer slowly. Werewolves have no tails - but if she had one she'd for sure be tucking it between her legs. I wait until she nudges me carefully and drops her large head in my lap before I touch her and scratch her behind her ears.

"I know you are afraid," I whisper. "I'd be scared out of my mind in your place. And I'd be whining all the time about how terribly I hurt... you're doing really well, love. Now, let's get this done, yes?"

"Yes." Rori lifts her head to lick my face. It's wet and slobbering and... ew... but it's Rori and she's been enduring my smelly socks for ages, so I guess, I can endure some slobber.

"That's my girl!" I pet her head. "So, you've been talking to Witherfang?"

"It's difficult," Rori sighs. "They are paranoid when it comes to the Dalish. Swiftrunner is blinded by his hatred for them, but he also adores Witherfang. And Witherfang wants to protect her werewolves more than anything else. They are like her children. If forced to either face a fight or negotiate for real, I believe, she would rather avoid more bloodshed."

"But we do need the curse to be broken. Peace between the werewolves and the Dalish wouldn't get us there."

"This curse, it's like Danyla said, it burns in all of... us. It's hard to endure..." She inhales deeply and a shudder runs through her. I cannot even imagine how horrible this has to be for her.

"Oh, Rori..."

She shakes her head to stop me from expressing any sympathy. "Anyway," she says firmly, visibly pulling herself together. "Nobody likes to be a werewolf. If there's a way to end the curse, the werewolves are the first to help us."

"So, what should we do?"

"If you found a way into their lair, they couldn't hide anymore. They would be forced to make a decision," Rori muses.

"The forest leads us astray. It really doesn't like us," I point out.

"Witherfang is... part of the forest. I cannot say why or how, but the forest protects her," Rori explains. "If you want to get to the lair, the forest mustn't see you as intruders."

"How should we do that? Dress up as sodding trees?" Oghren grunts.

"Maybe the tree-whisperer can talk us through," Morrigan sneers.

"Maybe I can." I smirk at the witch. She just gave me an idea. I had totally forgotten about the old oak and its acorn until now. "I already know exactly which tree I have to talk to. We need something to bargain first, though."
"Please hurry," Rori says. She sounds exhausted. "I have to return now. Swiftrunner grows impatient and Witherfang with him. The suffering of her pack is more than she is willing to endure much longer."

I kneel down to pet Barkley. "You take good care of her, lad. I count on you." Then I hug my girl goodbye. My arms hardly reach around her chest. She's one head taller than I am and weighs twice as much as I do. Her teeth are razor-sharp, she's hairy from head to toe and she slobbers quite a lot. She's still my woman. She will always be.
Witherfang vs. Zathrian

To say that Swiftrunner is not delighted to see us when we finally reach the heart of the forest, is quite an understatement. He glowers and snarls at us and flexes his claws. Rori right next to him, bounces around happily - and squeals.

"Alistair!" Rori darts towards me. She's as boisterous and exuberant as a puppy - a quite oversized puppy, mind you. When she pounces me everybody else just jumps backwards, ready to draw their weapons. It certainly looks as if this huge beast is about to bite my head off, but I know it's Rori so I stretch out my arms to embrace her - and totally underestimate her weight and size. She throws me to the ground and I find myself lying on the back with that huge, heavy beast on top of me that is my girlfriend. Slobbering all over me, she licks my face and yelps happily. "I knew you would make it!"

"Ro-rori, I can't breathe!" I gasp, trying to shove her off me. I am more than relieved to see she is fine... well, as fine as she can be, considering she's a savage canine monster.

"Sorry," she mumbles compunctiously and lifts herself off me. Then rolling around on the ground, she allows me to scratch her belly... and then Barkley announces his presence and I scratch his belly, too. Ain't we all just a happy family? It for sure feels like back in the old days when I slept in the kennels with the dogs... oh, that smell of wet dog hair... and still the scent of verbena lingers on Rori like a memory of times long gone... I can't believe she turned into that beast only a few days ago. Maker, how I miss that girl!

"The forest has not been vigilant enough. Still you come. You do not belong here, outsider. Leave this place," Swiftrunner interrupts our display of joy of our reunion.

"Why won't you let us try to settle this dispute?" Rori asks as softly as a werewolf can probably be. To my ears she still sounds terribly aggressive with all her growling and snarling. Standing between us and the other werewolves, she's smart enough to keep her distance. Swiftrunner glares at her as if he considered her to be his second breakfast. "Come on, Swiftrunner, the attacks on the Dalish have gotten you nowhere. How about a different approach?"

"Hrrr... Gingersnaps, you are no human no more. Your place is not with them."

"Gingersnaps?" I can't help it, I laugh out loud.

"You'd think being turned into a huge furry beast is bad enough," Rori sulks. "But in addition you also gain a stupid new name after joining the pack. And there are a whole lot of required group activities. Board and lodging defy description..."

"Sounds much like the Crows," Zevran snickers.

"Or the Chantry," I chuckle.

"The board and lodging is not that bad! And they don't give you stupid names at the Chantry," Leliana points out sullenly.

"Realy? Suddenly it wasn't just Alistair anymore but Brother Alistair. And some of the older boys there used to call me Sister Alice. I have to admit, me crying a lot out of anger, frustration and loneliness didn't do me much good when it came to getting along with the other boys.

"Sister Alice! Hehe," Oghren snickers.
"Thought you'd like that," I sigh.

"Gingersnaps suddenly doesn't sound that bad anymore," Rori mutters. She gently nudges my side with her large head and I scratch her behind her ears.

"You are intruders in our home," Swiftrunner bellows furiously. To hear Rori call Werewolfcity anything but a heaven for all lycanthropes - and fleas - greatly angers him. So much ingratitude after they took her in as a sister and named her Gingersnaps... And then she has the nerve to invite all her friends... "You come to kill as all of your kind do. We have learnt this lesson well."

"He's quite stubborn, isn't he?" I mutter.

"You can't even imagine," Rori sighs.

"Shall I bang its head against that rock? It might help with the thinking process," Shale suggests.

It isn't the most helpful comment she could have made. Actually, it leads to Swiftrunner attacking us. Not the brightest idea he has ever had, though. But before Shale can bang his head against anything, the great white wolf I've seen before, interrupts the battle that none of us wanted first place. One should believe Swiftrunner has learnt his lesson, but no! We turn around the next corner, and there he is again!

"You don't want another fight, my hairy friend, do you?" Zevran twirls his swords around and grins cheerfully. "You only just got your ass kicked. Can't you see, we... are ridiculously awesome!" the elf adds when the huge wolves growl aggressively, baring their fangs at us.

"Not helpful!" I hiss at him.

"We are invaded! And this is all your fault, Gingersnaps!" Swiftrunner barks at Rori.

"Swiftrunner, you pig headed prick! Don't you see they are here to help us..." Rori rolls her eyes in exasperation.

"There is no us!" He growls menacingly at her, shifting his weight while he blocks her path to stop her from slipping past him. "Go back to the ruins! Protect the lady!" he snaps at the other wolves. "You..." He points a large clawed paw at Rori. "You are no longer welcome here. Return to the treacherous Dalish, Gingersnaps, and tell them that they are doomed - just as you are."

"Oops, seems I just got promoted persona non grata," Rori observes cheerfully as we watch the werewolves flee into the ruins. I know that tone. She's not half as carefree as she appears to be.

"More like lupus non grata," Wynne chuckles.

Only now it dawns on me, that Rori just got declared an outsider by the leader of her pack. If this curse cannot be broken, she'll stand all alone. Rori grants Wynne a full-toothed grin. Still she keeps her distance, just like everybody else keep theirs from her - well, save from Morrigan, Shale and I. I doubt, Rori will be able to count on her human companions - not if she stays the monster she has become. Merciful Andraste, I do hope she knows what she is doing!

"Smell that? Looks like these fellows have marked their territory." Oghren sniffs the air as we approach the entrance of the ruins.

"Werewolves also have to see a man about a dog sometimes," Zevran snickers. "So they live in an old ruin? Hmmm... I wonder if there are other treasures to be found here besides wolf droppings?"
"There's a dragon. So there should be dragon droppings, too," Rori giggles.

"Really? Does it have a treasure?"

"Don't know. Didn't go to its lair." She shudders. "There were spiders. Huge spiders!"

"Now, that of course is a mighty good reason why one shouldn't walk into a dragon lair alone, the spiders one could encounter on the way," Wynne remarks dryly.

"My cute Fereldan fur ball, you are a huge and savage creature now yourself," Zevran points out with a laugh.

"Ewwww!" Rori shakes herself. "The cobwebs stick in my fur... and I'd have to touch the spiders with my hands... paws. Bah! Good thing we don't have to pass through that area. The entrance to the wolves' lair is far from any spider activity." She looks utterly relieved about that...

... until the werewolves slam their door shut in our faces and lock it so thoroughly even Shale cannot break through... that much for our portable ram.

"Is there another way?" I ask.

Rori whines and ducks her head.

"Rori?"

"Can't we try with knocking first?" Rori asks timidly. "Perhaps Swiftrunner changed his mind?"

Okay, I knock. I'd do anything for her. Unfortunately Swiftrunner would do anything for his lady. And he somehow got it into his pig head that he has to defend her against us. Not that farfetched, I admit. So the next ten minutes I keep talking to the door and all I receive is a "Go away!"

"Hehe, aye, bitchy, moody and pig headed," Oghren chuckles. "Much like Branka during her monthlies. Kept locking me out of the house, that's what she did, the sodding crazy nug-tail."

"Maybe you want to talk to him then?" I suggest.

"Nah, sodding waste of time."

Rori pouts. "This way," she grumbles, accepting her fate.

Some big fat spiders and a lot of whining and cringing from Rori later, we pass through another dragon lair with yet another - rather small - dragon and yet another treasure - much to Zevran's delight. Then there follow more spiders, some undead, ghosts and whatnot... after fighting our way through those ruins we could write a bestiary... and once we finally reach the werewolf lair, Swiftrunner has changed his mind about talking to us.

"Stop! Be at ease!" the huge werewolf barks. "We do not wish more of our people hurt. I ask you this now: Are you willing to parley?"

"Hehe, aye," Oghren chuckles. "That's just like Branka opening the front door once I got stuck trying to climb in through the sodding window."

Rori looks indeed much like a ginger about to snap. "What!?" she growls. "Now you want to talk!? You... you bloody base-born jackal..."

"Language!" Wynne sighs. "I do wonder wherefrom you get such foul vocabulary, young lady."
"From you," Rori retorts sweetly. "And from Mama. She could swear like a sailor."

"If you only had listened for once, you'd already know the answer, Swiftrunner. It is yes," I point out. I'm as hopping mad as Rori but I very much doubt hurling obscenities at my interlocutor is the best way to start negotiations. So I leave that part to Gingersnaps. "But really... if you're willing to talk, why didn't you say so earlier? Those ruins you got here, real nice, sure, but we could have done without the sightseeing, you know."

"Swiftrunner did not think it would matter. The lady disagrees. Obnoxious Gingersnaps has been trying to convince the lady ever since she came to join us. And the lady has been listening."
Swiftrunner clearly dislikes this. I guess, that's a good sign. His lady really does want to talk or he wouldn't be so uneasy about it. He seems more the type for final solutions when faced with a problem. "Since you have forced your way this far, we must acquiesce to the lady's wishes."

"Fine, then let's parley," I sigh. "Do you serve hors d'oeuvre and tea? I'd kill for some cheese right now."

Swiftrunner whirls around and snarls at me. Maker, relax, this was a joke! "I warn you if you break your promise and harm the lady I will come back from the Fade itself to see you pay."

"My dear furry friend, you so should find yourself a bitch and have some fun. It would help you to relax," Zevran comments.

Swiftrunner's not the only one. All these wolves do need some relaxation. All this growling, snarling and howling when we enter... yep, scary! They certainly do make their point... but, you know, after the Deep Roads, and after the Circle of Magi, after all the darkspawn, the abominations and bloodmages, demons and undead and giant spiders and so on, after seeing the archdemon and fighting a broodmother... and with Rori being a werewolf herself... this is certainly not a situation where I feel like wetting my pants anytime soon.

Rori warned me about the lady not being a werewolf but a spirit of the forest. I somewhat thought she'd look like... oh, I don't know... some kind of plant or somewhat like a will-o'-wisp... I most certainly didn't expect her to be... a very very naked woman - with branches or roots for hands and eyes as bitch black and shiny as two large beetles.

"O-là-là!" Zevran exclaims.

"Aye, hehe, the things I could do to her," Oghren grunts.

Oh Maker! How am I supposed to parley when I am all flustered and blushing from head to toe? I don't know what to do with my eyes... I try strictly looking at her face but she moves around and my eyes keep getting drawn to... all those parts that are so not covered. Even Morrigan is decently clothed compared to that spirit! Finally I decide, talking to the lady's feet will have to do.

"Err... hello?" I stammer, shifting my weight uncomfortably. "So, here we are, and here you are and... what are we going to talk about?"

"Zathrian and the curse," Rori prompts.

"Do not listen to them, lady, they will betray you. We must attack them now," Swiftrunner growls menacingly.

That much for him promising this not to be an ambush!

Rori immediately moves from her place at my side to stand between me and the werewolves. Baring
"Hush, Swiftrunner, your urge for battle has only seen the deaths of the very ones you've been trying to save," the lady gently scolds the huge wolf. "Is that what you want?"

"No, my lady. Anything but that."

"Okay, so can finally somebody explain to me what this is all about?" I sigh. I want my woman back. Preferably now.

"It was Zathrian who created the curse that these creatures suffer," the lady explains.

Seems Zathrian lost his son and daughter to some really nasty humans centuries ago. I do get why he would want revenge. I have my own vendetta with Loghain... Rori has a bone to pick with Howe... but Zathrian, he quite exaggerated it. Summoned that spirit, bound it into the body of a great wolf, that way created Witherfang and set it on the humans. I bet there were a whole lot of innocent amongst those who died or turned into werewolves. And then they lived in the forest, no more than mindless, savage beasts until the lady came along.

"So you ambush the Dalish why? For revenge?" I wonder. This is just... wrong. It's a vicious cycle with far too many deaths on both sides.

"In part," the lady admits. "We seek to end the curse. The crimes committed against Zathrian's children were grave but they were committed centuries ago by those who are long dead. Word was sent to Zathrian every time the landships passed this way, asking him to come but he has always ignored us. We will no longer be denied."

"We spread this curse to his people," Swiftrunner explains. "So he must end the curse to save them."

"Just he does not end it. Instead he has found himself some fools to do his dirty job," I mutter.

"Please, mortal, you must go to him. Bring him here. If he sees these creatures, surely he will agree to end the curse," the lady begs me.

"Wow, you are quite an optimist, aren't you?"

"Don't you want this curse to end and have the woman you love return to you?" Much to Swiftrunner's dismay, the lady leaves her place with the werewolves and comes forward to lay her hand on Rori's head.

"When she speaks of you, her words come from the heart. She has convinced me to believe you could be the man who can end the suffering of these miserable creatures."

Huh? What? Who? I?
Doom!

DOOM!

I laugh uneasily, sounding as foolish as I feel. Then I glare at Rori... I mean, her confidence in me, that's real sweet, but she must have lost all sense of reality! She just grins wolfishly at me, then licks my hand and presses her head to my side. Maker have mercy! I have to be strong for her. But I am scared. What if I fail? Andraste help me, what if I fail?

"If Zathrian comes, I will summon Witherfang," the lady says matter-of-factly. "I possess that power. I also have the power to ensure that Witherfang is never found. Tell Zathrian this."

Okay... seems I got no choice... oh how delightful!

"Gingersnaps can stay with us while you talk to Zathrian," the lady adds, beckoning Rori to join her and the other werewolves. "Her presence could make you appear biased."

I try not to but I snort. Of course! And Rori staying here with the werewolves makes sure I will not turn against them. I'm not an idiot, you know... well, not all the time.

I open my mouth to protest. There are thousand other places where Rori could stay while I talk to the keeper and where she would not be considered a hostage. It's Rori shaking her head slightly that silences me before I can even begin with spelling out to the lady what I think about her plan.

"Fine, I will talk to the keeper," I groan, not happy at all with the task and with leaving Rori back with the werewolves. "Just one more thing..." I turn to the huge alpha wolf, lock eyes with him and point my finger at him. "I do care as much about my lady as you do care about yours, Swiftrunner," I say in a voice that I tell myself is dangerously calm. "And believe me when I say: you will absolutely regret it should you as much as lay a finger... err... talon on her... anyway... I want her to be safe and sound when I return..."

Swiftrunner's answer is a low deep menacing growl.

Yeah, you're such a big bad wolf!

I just growl back at him.

Here, take that you flea bag!

I'm not as good as Sten when it comes to growling, but good enough it seems. Oh, that look on Swiftrunner's face! Priceless! Not that he has much of a facial expression... but he certainly didn't expect that from me.

Rather pleased with myself, I gather my companions for the new task... and find Zathrian already awaits us in the entrance hall of the ruins. Good, saves me from walking back all the way to the Dalish camp to seek him out. At the same time it proves the lady's story right. I really can't stand being manipulated!

"Before you ask: No. I don't have the heart," I skip past a greeting or expressing my surprise to find Zathrian here - because I am so not surprised. It's hard not to just punch him in the face... He had his reasons... like centuries ago! But right now... all I can see is the man who could end this suffering if the lady is right. And it takes me a whole lot self-control not to knock him out with my Templar skills and drag him to the werewolves by the hem of his silly robes. This guy so reminds me why the templars do such an important job. "I have heard the story you didn't think necessary to tell us. Where the curse came from and such. So let's get straight to the point: The werewolves are no
mindless beasts anymore and they wish to talk."

"They deserve to be wiped out and not defended," the keeper snarls, his face contorted with hatred. "Even if they have regained their minds, they are still the same worthless creatures that their ancestors were. They deserve nothing more than the misery they possess."

Merciful Andraste! Rori is completely innocent and yet she is condemned to pay for a crime she never committed! The werewolves down there... they have done nothing at all but what was in their nature that got twisted centuries ago by a heartbroken, vengeful man. And he just stands here, all self-righteously talking about his pain and his suffering...

"Shall I crush the nasty mage's head?" Shale whispers to me eagerly. "Please? Maybe I could crush it just a little bit? Or tear its arms out?"

It's a pity I have to tell her no.

"This is not your battle, Grey Warden. Let us just take the heart and be done with it," Zathrian says unnervedly.

"Wrong. This is my battle. It became my battle when my love got infected with your curse," I say as calmly as I can possibly manage. I admit, I'm not very good at it. I wish Rori was here to do the talking. My Templar training keeps getting in my way. It offers a pretty simple solution to this and Cullen would really approve of it. "No!" I snap when Zathrian opens his mouth to feed me some more... pigeon crap for sure. "The hatred in you has condemned innocent to suffer, it has condemned your own people. It is time to end this now."

"I will not help the descendants of savages who deserved the curse they received," Zathrian hisses back at me.

"What about Danyla?" I shout, kicking a stone forcefully to get rid of some of the tension that comes from fighting down the urge to throttle him. "What about Rori? What about all the others... they weren't even born when your children were murdered!"

"It was the werewolves who condemned your woman, not I! When you bring me the heart..." Zathrian begins anew.

Yeah. Sure. Cut a heart form some beast's chest to perform some ritual... Does he really believe me to be such a fool as to help him perform blood magic?

"Talk to them!" I insist. "If you deny this... your curse, your hatred, your mercilessness... you might not be a savage creature by your looks... but you are in your heart."

"How dare you!" Zathrian bellows and for a moment I believe I have pushed him too far but the anger fades from his face, making room for the contemptuous mask he wears most of the time. "Fine. There's no point in it, but let's see what the spirit has to say... And if it's only to prove to you that beasts will be beasts. You have to promise, though, to defend me in case they should attack me."

That's the very last promise I want to make... but I do get that much: Zathrian can end the curse. Having him come along willingly is certainly better than having Shale break his arms and legs - although the prospect is rather tempting. "Alright, I will protect you. Just don't you try and fool me. I was a Templar before I became a Grey Warden, just so you know, mage."

"That's what you call diplomacy, son?" Wynne mutters from behind when we all march back to meet the werewolves.
"Considering this is a crazy mage and I have been raised to become a Templar... yes?"

Wynne pats my shoulder compassionately. "Try more to think like a Grey Warden. Rein in your temper. Control your fear. With a lip like yours, son, this is not going to end in peace."

Whoa, thanks a lot for the advice! Now, if she had a manual coming with it, that would be helpful indeed.

When we enter the hall with Zathrian, the werewolves do everything to appear just like the savage beasts the keeper says they are. The greetings exchanged between Zathrian and the spirit is far from cordial. The greeting I receive from Rori is... rather wet. Disgusted Zathrian steps away from me. Hey! She drools a lot and she's not exactly pretty. But if he was looking for something human in the beasts he created, then Rori is the best example he can get. To see that beautiful, brave and caring young woman in the shape of a monster... it's heart-breaking! I cannot understand how this cannot touch Zathrian deep inside, how his hatred can be so much stronger than his mercy.

"They are just like their ancestors," Zathrian spits with contempt. "Wild savages. Worthless dogs. Their twisted shape only mirrors their monstrous hearts. Where's the sense in talking when we all know where this will lead?"

"It does not have to be that way. There is room in your heart for compassion Zathrian. Surely your retribution is spent," the lady beseechs the unwavering elf.

"My retribution is eternal, spirit. As is my pain. This is justice. No more."

"You are... such a self-righteous asshole," Rori barks.

"The redheaded woman that was travelling with you, I take it?" Zathrian remarks coolly, ignoring Rori but addressing me instead. "What does she know about my pain?"

"What do you know about hers?" I retort, putting my hand on Rori's head as she crouches at my feet.

"Are you certain your pain is the only reason you will not end this curse?" the lady of the forest asks calmly. "Have you told the mortal how it was created?"

"Nope. He has not. Nobody ever tells me the important stuff."

"This is an old forest, mortal. And I am it's spirit, it's heart. I was not summoned from across the veil but pulled from the trees, the rock and soil. Such powerful magic however could not be accomplished without Zathrian's blood."

I knew it! Call it instinct; blame it on the Templar training... A blood mage! A filthy... treacherous... lying blood mage!

"The curse and his life are intertwined. As long as the curse exists, so does he."

"So would Zathrian's death end the curse?" Come on, say yes! If not for Rori being inflicted with that blasted curse, I'd have gladly bashed the keeper's head in already. I can feel it inside of me, making my nerves tingle as I summon it instinctly, the spell breaking energy that Templars possess...

"No."

"The lady of the forest says.

Oh blast it! Why does everything have to be so damn complicated?

"The curse has a life of its own, though Zathrian's life depends on it. His death plays a part in its
ending, however."

"Then we kill him! We tear him apart now!" Swiftrunner barks. My sentiments exactly. It's the very first time the alpha and I agree.

"For all your powers of speech, you are beasts still," Zathrian triumphantly exclaims. I swear, he's the only beast I see. "What do you gain from killing me? Only I know how the ritual ends. And I will never do it."

"You see, we must kill them all!" Swiftrunner howls even as the lady lays her hand on his shoulder soothingly.

"See, they turn on you as quickly," Zathrian speaks to me. "Do what you have come here to do, Grey Warden! Or get out of my way."

Oh Maker have mercy! I exchange a look with Rori, lying at my feet. Her dark blue eyes are the only things that have not changed. I can see the human girl she used to be in them - and the sadness when she inclines her head.

Only Zathrian knows the ritual to end the curse... A knowledge that will be lost with his death... All he wants is to wipe out the werewolves... Only with the spirit's help do the werewolves realize they are more than just mindless savage animals...

There are no words that need to be spoken between my love and me. We both know what we have to do. We both know there's only one way to decide... and it breaks my heart...

Rori nuzzles my hand with her cool moist snout and whines lowly. I kneel down to take her head into my hands, gently stroking the soft fur with my thumbs. Then I bend to place a kiss to her forehead.

"We're standing for what's right here, no matter what," I say, my voice choked and broken as I move to stand in between Zathrian and Witherfang. Rori is at my side... like she has always been. But this time it is different... it's like saying goodbye... I raise my sword, gripping it firmly as to stop it from trembling in my hands.

"So it has decided to fight the nasty mage? Good, I have wanted to crush its head for some time now," Shale drones. I guess, if anybody understands how Rori has to feel, it's the golem.

"But...," Zevran stutters. He's so shocked, he can hardly unsheathe his swords. His eyes dart from me to Rori as if he was hoping we'd start laughing and go "Gotcha!"

"Nothing is lost yet," Rori growls when Morrigan joins her.

"Kadan." Sten inclines his head towards me. Whoa... awkward... "I am honoured to fight at your side." Huh? Something has to be wrong with my hearing... Or this is the Fade and some demon has a very strange sense of humour...

"That is your decision?" Zathrian snorts. "Then you die with them." Raising his staff as he summons his magical power around him. "All of you will suffer as you deserve."

Maker have mercy, as this man knows none!
Blasted evil immortal blood mages!

My first thought, when Zathrian attacks us, is: Idiot! All alone against a pack of werewolves, an ancient spirit, and our - according to Zevran - ridiculously awesome party... And then this skinny bald guy almost beats the shit out of us... Well, there is a reason why blood magic is considered such a terrible, terrible force. They taught me at the Chantry never to underestimate a rampant bloodmage. No kidding! I feel completely drained from all the purifying and disturbing spells, and when Zathrian finally falls to his knees in front of me, I am so spent, I can hardly lift my sword without toppling over.

"No... no more... I cannot... cannot defeat you," Zathrian wheezes, holding up his hands in defence. My exhaustion is the only reason why he actually gets the chance to say something at all. That sword is just too heavy for me...

"Finish it!" Swiftrunner growls behind me. "Kill him now!"

Maker, I really would if I could, but I'm on my knees also, trying to push myself upright again by using my sword like an old man would use his cane. Blasted Templar skills, they suck the life right out of a man.

"No!" Leliana and Rori cry at the same time. "Don't kill him!" Rori even makes the effort to pull me away from Zathrian. I'm going to laugh about that when I can breathe again.

"No, Swiftrunner," the lady interrupts when the huge wolf is about to throw himself at Zathrian. "We will not kill him. If there is no room in our hearts for mercy, how can we expect there to be room in his."

The ex-templar in me disagrees, but as he is unable to as much as form a coherent sentence, all he can do is grunt and attempt to shake his head - and even that only has me feel dizzier than before. Not that I make much of an effort... There's still hope in me left that Zathrian could change his mind. My instructors would be so utterly disappointed, seeing me fail as a Templar again.

Rori picks me up and has me sit on her lap as if I was a toddler. I snuggle to her with my head resting against her furry shoulder, waiting for my heart to slow down to normal, and listen to the lady and the keeper talk about the curse. The stubborn bastard still insists he cannot end it.

"Maker's Breath, hasn't this gone long enough Zathrian?" I groan after some toing and froing. I'm sick and tired of this. My woman is a huge furry beast that smells of wet dog - and as much as Fereldans love their dogs, I still prefer her human form. "You talk about your people. Well, there are many back in the camp, infected with this curse. Instead of babbling about your pain and your age and whatever other reason you believe you have, you could end their suffering with ending the curse."

Zathrian is still making a fuss...

"For the love of Andraste, what more does he want from them!" Rori whispers, sounding frustrated and close to tears.

"We beg you," the lady says softly, "show mercy!" And with her all the werewolves but Gingersnaps drop to their knees in front of the man who condemned them and bow their heads.
"You shame me, spirit," Zathrian gasps, finally, finally touched by the gesture of the beasts he created.

"Then you will end the curse?" the lady asks hopefully. That moment everybody is staring at Zathrian. It's now or never and when he raises his head to look the spirit he summoned in the eyes, I am not the only one to hold his breath.

Then the ancient elf nods tiredly. "Let us... let us put an end to it all."

Great Maker!

When the curse is broken, Zathrian falls to the ground. His body crumbles as the time he has stolen catches up with him and soon all that is left of him is a heap of dust. At the same time the lady's body begins to dissolve in a golden hue of light that spreads from her onto the werewolves that have gathered around her. It's so bright, it blinds me and I cover my eyes for protection.

Once the light is gone... so is the lady... and the werewolves... they are... they...

Oh merciful Andraste!

There's misshapen heaps on the ground where the beasts stood before. Smouldering heaps surrounded by the sickening stench of burnt hair and flesh.

Next to me Leliana faints. So does Zevran - but - unlike the bard - gets caught by Oghren before he can hit the ground. Morrigan is being violently sick. I couldn't care less. I am on my hands and knees next to the misshapen well-done meatball that used to be my wolfwoman.

"But... but... the curse ended," Wynne stammers over and over again while I just... I don't know... I want to scream but no sound leaves my mouth. I want to cry but there are no tears... I... it feels like dying and yet I am still alive... all I manage is a few choked sounds... I hesitantly lay my hands onto the smouldering werewolf corpse... and jump backwards when I feel... something moving inside...

Now I do scream.

The heap of flesh and fur shakes and then it breaks open, like being torn from the inside and through the small gap there appears... a hand. A small human hand all covered in blood.

Holy Maker!

I scramble back towards the smouldering remains and start ripping at the gap, tearing it open until it's wide enough for me to reach into it to get hold of the human being inside and pull her out.

I fall backwards and Rori lands on top of me. She's very naked and trembling and crying and covered in gore from head to toe - but who cares when she's back and fully human again. That's the first thing I check, two ears, two eyes, two legs, two arms, then counting her fingers and toes like midwives do with newborn babies. Yep, everything as it should be.

"Rori! Maker's breath, Rori! Are you injured? No? Holy Maker! I love you, oh, how much I love you... you stink and you're absolutely gross... but I still love you." I cry and laugh of joy and relief at the same time, I hug her and kiss her and cradle her - and then I count her fingers and toes again, just to really make sure.

"Alistair, please, please, take me away from this place," Rori murmurs, clinging to me as if I was about to dissolve should she let go. I am the last one to object. I want to get out of these ruins and never return again. So I leave it to Wynne and Leliana to help the other victims of the curse and to
Zevran and Oghren to recover the dragon's treasure.

The forest has changed. It's not as hostile anymore as it used to be - or maybe I am imagining things. The moment I stumble out of these ruins into the bright sunlight with Rori in my arms and faithful Barkley at my heels, I feel somewhat guarded as if someone... something watches over me.

The forest leads me back to our makeshift camp next to a brook. We are so exhausted; we collapse on the ground and fall asleep in each other's arms at once with Barkley watching over us. Later I help Rori bathe. All the time neither Rori nor I say a single word. Now it's over, we finally realize what a terrible mess this all has been. I can't even imagine how Rori feels right now. It's already hard for me when actually nothing really happened to me.

I use up a whole bar of her verbena scented soap only to wash her hair. And another one to scrub the rest of her clean. Barkley eats the third one before we can stop him. Then he stands there, cocks his large head to one side, looks at us with puppy-dog-eyes, wags his tail... and belches. It's as if he had broken yet another spell that bound us... Rori begins to giggle and that sound is so beautiful and catching that I join in and soon we are both laughing so hard, we roll around on the ground with Barkley bouncing all around us and barking happily.

Grinning broadly at her, I pull her into my arms and kiss her, pouring all my emotions into that caress, my love, my joy and happiness, the fear, sadness and grief that held me captive for as long as she was gone. She returns the kiss with as much eagerness, passion and despair and we end up on the blanket together, tenderly exploring each other's bodies. It's a bit like coming home after a long time. Everything feels familiar and is yet so new and exciting. And it scares me...

Maker, we've never been so close to losing us! The mere memory chills me to the bone - and I know, I could never be the same man without her, that losing her would destroy me.

"Rori...," I murmur, my voice raspy and raw with emotion.

"Hush," she whispers, putting one finger on my lips. "Make love to me. Please, Alistair, please."

Oh, that she doesn't have to ask for twice! "Your desire is my command." Smiling, I catch her hand in mine, placing a soft kiss to every knuckle. I have every intention to worship her like only she deserves it and to kiss every inch of her ravishing body, from head to toe... or the other way round. Taking hold of her ankle, I gently kiss her instep. Rori immediately tenses and glares at me.

"Hey!" She points her finger at me scolding. "That's not what I meant! Alistair! Let go! Now!"

"No!" I tighten my hold on her ankle, ignoring her glowering at me.

"Alistair! Don't you dare!"

I do dare. I just can't help it. She can squirm all she wants, I still place a soft kiss on the ball of her foot and on every single one of her cute toes - and then I suck the big one into my mouth.

Rori giggles, her face all flushed, her dark blue eyes sparkling, she's so bewitchingly adorable. The golden-pink light of the setting sun gives the wild curls framing her pale face a fiery glow. Tiny droplets of water glitter on her creamy skin, pearling down her beautiful bosom and pool into the small cavity of her navel.

Maker, I thought I would lose her! And now she is here with me, human again and in all her naked glory!

I still can't believe that Zathrian gave in and lifted the curse from her and all of the other werewolves.
It seems so unreal to me... that moment when she broke free from the body of the beast as if she had worn it like a coat. A very stinky, terribly gross and utterly disgusting coat...

I keep pinching myself - or Rori, who then swats playfully at me - to reassure myself I am not dreaming this, that it is really Rori sprawled on a blanket in the middle of blossoming spring flowers at the shore of the brook. The water murmurs softly, birds sing, the sweet scent of the flowers mingle with the rich moist smell of the forest... all this beauty was lost to me until now when I suck at this awesomely pretty big toe that belongs to the most ravishing woman in all Thedas... who is about to kick my teeth in if I don't let go of her foot at once. Maker, that girl is ticklish!

I release her and, giggling uncontrollably, she collapses on the blanket. "Mean!" Rori gasps as she wipes the tears of laughter from the corners of her eyes. "You are so... mean! I've suffered so much. You should be nice to me!"

"You think so? Then how about this? Nice enough?" I purr, lazily trailing kisses up her calves, pausing at her knees to kiss all those cute freckles there - until she grows impatient because it's really a lot of freckles.

"What's that supposed to be?" Rori giggles, watching me quizzically as she's propped up on her elbows. "The Alistair version of Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes?" A broad and truly evil grin spreads across my face. Rori's smirk suddenly seems a bit forced. "Oh no! No, no... no! Don't you...!"

But I already hum the tune of the children's song as I pull her to a sitting position - much to her dismay. "Duh, Alistair! I want you to make love to me, not to dance that silly..."

"Head." I run my fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp while I kiss her temples and the side of her face.

"Mhmmm," Rori purrs, leaning into the caress. "Maybe that's not so bad after all..."

"Shoulders." I trail open mouthed kisses across her shoulders and collarbones to the hollow of her throat.

Rori sighs in delight and relaxes onto the blanket, purring like a cat that gets her belly rubbed - until I grab her legs and run my tongue across the hollow of her knees. "Knees and..." I smirk triumphantly.

"NO!" Rori squeaks, trying to get away from me as soon as it dawns on her that she is in great danger. She's lithe and she's fast, still I manage to tackle her down and pin her beneath me before she can dart off into the forest.

"... toes..." Mwhahaha! She shrieks and laughs and kicks and squirms - but there's no escape. The ticklespawn knows no mercy! "... knees and toes..." I only release her when she can hardly breathe anymore and her face is bright pink. She rolls around on the ground and gasps for air in between her giggle fits.

"And again!" I cheer, grinning broadly at her.

"No-oo-oo!" Rori hiccups.

"Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes..." This is fun. At least for me. I am tickled pink. So is Rori, at least all the tickling has her turn a brighter shade of pink. Especially her face and ears glow...

"I... I hate you!" Rori gasps as she very unsuccessfully tries to scowl at me. Realizing her failure
when I just chuckle and brush her damp hair from her brow to kiss her forehead, she sticks her tongue out at me. "Hate you," she mutters with emphasis. Despite all her contempt and hatred, she snuggles to me when I pull her into my arms and smile lovingly at her. "You're such a jerk," she grumbles, punching my arm while I laugh at her.

"And eyes..." I chuckle, placing soft kisses on both her eyelids. Rori just pouts, having decided to be in a huff.

"...and ears..." I breathe as I nibble at her earlobe, moving on to trail kisses along the outline of her ear. Rori crosses her arms in front of her chest and presses her lips together stubbornly, in an utterly useless attempt to stifle the soft moan that escapes her.

"...and mouth..." My lips claim hers and for a moment she refuses to kiss me back. It lasts about two seconds, then she hungrily accepts my caress and our tongues intertwine in a long-lasting, passionate kiss that leaves us both breathless.

"...and nose..." I nuzzle her nose with mine, causing her to smile as she nuzzles back. "Ready for the last line?"

"Alistair, please..."

"Head..." Starting at her temple, I trail kisses across her cheeks and jawline, then I suck and bite and kiss my way down her neck... "...shoulders..." ... across her collarbones and cleavage until I reach the soft mounds of her breasts...

"That's not my shoulders, Alistair..." Rori's half-heartedly murmured complaint is drowned by a loud moan when I roughly suck her nipple into my mouth. "Maker's Breath!"

Roaming her body with my lips, I proceed downwards, across the flat of her belly, with a little intermediate stop to lap up the water in the hollow of her navel.

"Not my knees..." Rori giggles as she teasingly tugs at my hair.

Grinning smugly I lift one of her legs on my shoulder, turning my head to kiss her inner thigh up to her knee, then repeating the same with her second leg. "...knees and..." I lower my head to kiss the soft folds of her womanhood - thoroughly - until I have her gasp my name in between those cute mewing noises she makes. I watch her while I lap up her juices. She's lost to her own pleasure. Her cheeks are so prettily flushed, her lips slightly parted, eyes half-closed as she rolls her head from side to side.

Mhmm...

"Caress your breasts," I whisper against her heated and moist flesh as I push one finger inside her tight entrance. Doing as told, Rori obediently cups her breasts, rubbing her nipples between her fingers while I keep pleasing her with my tongue.

Maker, she's so... beautiful... and hot...those cute mewing noises and soft moans, the way she gasps my name... and that sight of her coming undone as her orgasm makes her whole body shudder and toes curl...

"...toes..." I cheer triumphantly. Now, that was really worth all the waiting and reining in my own desire.

Rori just groans and with some effort props herself up on her elbows to look at me. Her hair is a tousled mess, her cheeks burn bright red. "That song isn't yet finished, you know," she purrs as she
walks her fingers across my chest and the firm muscles of my belly.

Insatiable little minx.

I just grin.

"... knees and..." In one fluid motion I flip her around and pull her onto her knees with her firm little ass high in the air and her face pressed down on the blanket. She squeaks in surprise, then cries out when I thrust into her. "Maker's Breath!" I swear it's not only going to be her toes to curl this time. I think, I need to rest for a moment... that tightness of her moist velvet heat wrapped around my manhood... it's almost too much... "Holy Maker!"

"Stop invoking the Maker, Chantry boy, you got a goddess to worship!" Rori teases, wiggling her pretty little ass in a way that pushes me even deeper inside.

"Blasphemy!" I groan and - collecting all the willpower I possess - pull out of her. Rori snarls at me and I can hardly stop her from turning round and tackling me. "Now, behave," I growl, bringing my palm down on her hindquarters once I have her back in place. She gasps, then moans loudly when I slowly slide my manhood back into her. Out again - and another sharp slap to her buttocks follows. And so I worship her until her backside is burning red with the imprints of my palm clearly visible. Her moans and cries mingle with my own sounds of pleasure, the world around us fails to exist and it's only her and me, mating like mammals in the middle of an ancient forest.

Out of the corners of my eyes, I see the mabari has taken advantage of nobody watching him and is gnawing at one of Leliana's fancy green boots. Rori has noticed, too and makes a weak attempt to scold him... Barkley responds with dropping the drooled all over boot as he bounces towards us and licks Rori's face while she's still on her hands and knees with me pounding her from behind...

I swear the blasted dog does that on purpose!

Rori very unsuccessfully tries to fend him off. "Ewww! No... oh Maker!... you filthy pooch... yesssss!... no!...not you, you mangy scoundrel... Maker's Breath! ... get lost... ohhh... you slobbering flea-bag!..."

This is so hilarious, I just can't resist...

"Yeah, baby, I love it when you talk dirty! "

This is probably the first time we laugh ourselves into an orgasm.

"TOES!" I roar, with Barkley joining in with a loud howl and Rori just being a complete mess of giggle fits and the aftermaths of her climax.
Frolicking in the Forest

Chapter Notes

Kinda an interlude chapter with more fluff and smut specially for Notevensorry.

Zevran recites from Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream.
Freaking awesome art by Erusel

When I wake next to a very grumpy and sleepy redhead in the morning, I just grin from ear to ear, place a kiss on her forehead and crawl out of the tent to make coffee and breakfast. The scent of coffee, bacon and eggs finally revives Rori - and Barkley, that greedy glutton of a dog.

Rori does celebrate her first cup of coffee after becoming human again. Clutching the mug with both hands, she inhales the scent and then, with her eyes closed, slowly sips the black liquid in complete silence. I hardly dare to breathe, knowing it to be unwise to disturb Rori before she has had her first dose of coffee. So while having my cup of tea - black with milk and sugar - I just sit and watch her, enjoying the sight of my just-out-of-bed woman wearing nothing but my shirt.

Our companions have not yet returned to our camp, but with Swiftrunner and the dragon's treasure and taking the message of Zathrian's fate to the Dalish, that's no surprise. Rori doesn't mind waiting a bit, and neither do I - especially since we do know how to keep ourselves entertained...

Straddling me, Rori shaves me and I simply enjoy her treatment and caress. She's completely naked and every time she leans closer, her soft bosom is pressed against my chest. Maker, I so can't wait for her to put down that razor... Then we build ourselves small boats of bark and twigs and leaves and let them swim in the brook. We splash around in the cold water a bit until we're dripping wet and then help each other getting warm again... Afterwards we lie lazily in the grass, sunbathing while we munch apples and the cookies we stole from Sten. And since we have rested a little and got some refreshment, some exercise can't hurt, right? Sometime later I fall asleep on watching the clouds with Rori in my arms.

When I wake this time, I find my beloved ginger sitting on a stone next to the brook, dangling her feet into the water.

Maker's Breath!

She wears a wreath of white flowers and green leaves on her head, an equal garland is wound around her hips. Her naked body is painted with red clay, a small stripe runs across the brink of her nose, two more adorn her cheekbones at both sides of her face. Two muddy handprints smudge the pale flesh of her breasts, two more can be found on her buttocks and at her waist. Merciful Andraste, she looks like a spirit of the forest, a dryad from the old myths and legends and her mere sight
arouses me. When she turns at the sound of my astonished gasp, an impish smile curves her lips and mischief sparkles in her eyes.

"Do you want to play?" Rori purrs, stretching like a cat as she slips off the boulder. Moving with the grace of a halla, she dances across the small clearing, circling me but staying just out of reach.

Only when I pick myself up from the ground, I notice that she has crowned me with a wreath similar to hers and painted me with the same red clay while I was sound asleep. The branch of the rhyming oak she put in my hand like a sceptre. We must look like the king and queen of the forest. "You know, I'm always in for a game... or two."

"Then catch me if you can and you shall have your reward, prince." Thus said she darts off into the forest - and I follow behind.

Part of my mind is arguing that it is not a very smart idea to run through a forest completely naked and unarmed but for the dagger Rori has strapped to her thigh and my oak wood sceptre when said forest is crammed with dangerous wild animals, mad trees and occasionally darkspawn. It would be really unfortunate if we were caught by any of these beasts with nothing but a piece of wood and a knife to defend ourselves.

The forest, however, has changed when the lady once more became a part of the trees and brooks and rocks and soil. I don't feel like an intruder anymore but my bare feet carry me easily through the woods. Rori's only a few steps ahead, shouting with joy she seems as if she wants to embrace life itself. I join in and we both cheer and laugh and sing out loud - until Rori stumbles upon a path and... freezes. She comes to a halt so abruptly that I almost run into her.

And there we stand in the middle of a path, both absolutely stark naked but for a muddy war paint and I sporting a rather prominent erection... and only a stone's throw away there's Wynne... and Leliana... Morrigan... Zevran... Oghren... and Sten... and Shale... and they are all staring at us slack-jawed.

Oh blast!

Doom!

DOOM!

All flustered Rori shifts her weight uneasily, grins sheepishly and waves a shy hello. I cannot wave. I need both of my hands to cover my most private parts. All I manage, is some awkward grinning and an all over recolouring when I blush from head to toe.

"Err... what... what are you doing here?" I squeak in a high-pitched voice.

"We are just walking down a path, all properly clothed," Leliana observes. "What are you doing here, not so properly clothed?"

"Err... well, our clothes...we only just, uhm, took a bath and there were... uhm... squirrels... giant squirrels," I stammer as I try to pluck a branch from a bush to get hold of something that could cover me more decently. Failing, I change my tactics and just hide behind the bush. "...nasty... thieving squirrels... and they snatched our clothes while we didn't look... and now we are trying to retrieve them..."

"I see." The bard grins wickedly. "And what would those giant thieving squirrels do with your garments?"
"Cushion their nests with them of course," Rori says as if it was a well-known and scientifically proven fact about giant squirrels. "It keeps their babies warm."

That's the moment when Sten covers his eyes with his hand and shakes his head in exasperation... Yep, that's us, the last two Grey Wardens of Ferelden, the only hope to end the Blight and slay the archdemon, bouncing around in the forest completely starkers. I'm afraid he won't feel any better once he finds out we ate his cookies.

"Ahh, young love," Wynne chuckles and smiles that wicked old lady smile of hers. I somewhat get the impression she doesn't buy our squirrel story.

Morrigan snorts in disgust. "The damage done to Rori's brain by the transformation is worse than I expected."

"Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends," Zevran recites cheerfully. "Ahh, Morrigan, my magical temptress, don't you pull such a face! It makes you look so much like your mother..."

Morrigan narrows her eyes at him. Her resemblance to a viper is indeed striking... in a very creepy way. "You would have been her type, you know."

"Oh? Elven and handsome?"

"The sort that will never be missed," the witch hisses.

"Aye, with the boss... again, hehe." Oghren thrusts his hips forward as he snickers. "And there they keep telling us about elves frolicking in the thicket and nug-swear like that... hehe..." His eyes look as if they are going to pop out of their sockets anytime soon the way he leers at Rori. I hobble clumsily to stand in front of her, blocking her from Oghren's sight. That's when Rori grabs my arm and drags me along into the bushes, pointing at something high up in the branches and shouting "Squirrel!"

"Andraste's ashes!" I groan as I waddle after Rori, still covering my manhood with my hands. Suddenly running all naked through the forest doesn't sound like such a good idea anymore. I feel as if even the birds laugh at me. Awkward. My cheeks are burning, my entire body feels too hot and I am so thoroughly mortified, I am considering vanishing in these woods forever. Maybe we should drop by the loony hermit to ask him if we could move in with him.

We reach a little lake surrounded by huge boulders covered in moss and old fir trees with low hanging branches. The water is as still as a huge black mirror. It's beautiful and peaceful but all I can think about is that we have to return to the camp sometime - and we are still naked! Maybe Rori can make a garland that actually covers something... everything. If we could find larger leaves...

Rori clearly has other things in mind. She takes my hands when I start looking around for something suitable and silences me with a kiss when I attempt to protest. It starts all sweet and tender with her arms loosely wrapped around my neck and mine around her waist. She nibbles and sucks at my lips teasingly, tempting me to claim hers fully. Trailing one hand down my chest and belly, she wraps it around my yet untamed erection and slowly slides it up and down my length. Her mouth follows the same path as she sinks to her knees in front of me, never letting go of my manhood. Gently blowing her hot breath against the sensitive tip, she goes on teasing me mercilessly as she lazily swirls her tongue around my glans. It's the sweetest torture.

My hands entangled with her hair, I lean my back against a boulder and watch Rori sucking my length into her mouth. She sets on a slow rhythm that's bound to drive me crazy, building up tension inside. Whenever I try to urge or to a faster pace, she pulls back, teasing me before she returns to her...
excruciating ministration. Maker's Breath! I cannot endure this any longer!

Grunting in frustration, I pull her to her feet, swirl her around and press her with her back against the boulder. "So impatient, my prince," Rori giggles when I rub my fingers at her folds testingly. Oh she's so hot and moist, my fingers come away slick with her juices.

"Taste yourself," I mutter, intending to have her lick my fingers clean.

"Bah!" Rori exclaims, then shrugs. "Oh well, if it makes you happy." I wish she'd have sucked as roughly at my length as she now sucks at my index finger.

"Oh, you're such a temptress." While I lean in to claim her lips for a deep kiss, I run my hands down her body, and cupping her breasts, I place my palms onto the handprints of red clay she has left there. Rori moans softly into my mouth when I pinch her nipples and thrust into her at the same time.

Maker's Breath! The softness of her body pressed against mine... the velvet heat of her womanhood, tightly clenching around my length... the sweetness of her kiss as our tongues intertwine in a dance of passion... Her moans are like music to me, so soft and gentle and yet strong and passionate. Her arms wrapped around my neck, her legs around my waist, she sways and bucks her hips, meeting my thrusts as we push each other towards that mind-numbing bliss of utter satisfaction. This is perfect, she is perfect and I cannot stop wondering in awe at how I became blessed with her love.

After our love making we spend some time, lying in the grass together, lazily exchanging kisses and all the tender caress that comes with exploring each other’s body. I'd happily spend the whole day like that. The only thing missing is some cheese. Rori, however, wants to play and who am I to deny her desire... especially when she has made me run a mile or two to get what I desire.

"You are a bad bad girl, you know." I whisper against her lips. "You need to be disciplined."

"Oh, please, please, do not hurt me!" Rori's attempt of looking frightened and submissive fails due to the wide grin that spreads across her face. Her bouncing up and down giddily also doesn't help with the impression of a scared and helpless young woman.

"Hurt you? Perish that thought, my fair lady," I smile reassuringly at her. Rori does not smile. And she looks far from fair the way she glowers at me. "I would never hurt you." I place my hands over my heart. "But a punishment you deserve..."

"Oh, yes, yes, I most certainly do," Rori agrees.

"So you will clean the dishes for the next two weeks and wash my socks and..."

Rori narrows her eyes at me and, hissing like a wildcat, grabs me by the back of my head to pull me against her. She bites down on my lower lip, tearing blood, and then kisses me with a fierce passion
that leaves me breathless.

"I said punishment, not reward," I manage to gasp in that short moment when she lets go of me for breathing. I am expecting her to protest, to pounce me once more, to push me to the ground and mount me and ride me to a mind-numbing blissful orgasm... making all those dirty wet fantasies of mine come true... but I get none of that.

"Oh, okay, then lets get back to the camp," Rori says, shrugging nonchalantly. She smiles, pinches my cheeks, slips out of my embrace and walks back towards the camp...

Duh!? What!?

That manipulative little beast!

For a second or two I consider letting her go. It would serve her right. But I've never had much trouble with losing when playing games. So Rori can be the winner here as long as I get what she has made me crave for.

She gets as far as two steps before I whirl her around and make her bend over, that way presenting her pretty pink slit to me. Oh, what a sight! She cries out in surprise and clutches the tree for support. She's still trying to regain her balance when I ram my length into her. And then I fuck her... I mean, for real... and hard... and all she can do is cling to that tree and moan and whimper and cry out her pleasure. We make a hellish noise and in the end I'm so exhausted and utterly satisfied, I just let myself drop to the ground and sit there with a wide foolish grin plastered across my face, looking like a complete retard and also drooling a little. But who cares? I see stars twinkling in front of my eyes and my whole body feels like floating.

Rori flops down on her knees, still hugging the tree, pressing her heated cheek to the rough bark. She's all flustered and breathless and grinning as foolishly as I do.

Then all of a sudden a shudder runs through the tree. Squeaking, Rori falls backwards, scrambling away from the huge oak as it stretches and rustles its branches... It's the Grand Oak, the one who gave me its branch after retrieving its acorn from the mad hermit.

"Err... hello again," I mutter, grinning rather sheepishly. This is just typical. There's thousands of trees in this forest and I choose the only talking one to have it off with Rori right beneath it.

"Friend of yours?" Rori asks timidly. She has come to stand behind me, peeking around me shyly.

"Thou do return, my mortal friend," the tree drones once it has identified me. "Thou brought my sadness to an end!"

"I found its lost acorn," I whisper to my confused and shocked ginger. "Err, yes... I'm sorry we did disturb you... we... err..."

The oak seems pleasantly unperturbed by the display of... uhm... affection... that has just taken place. Well, considering this is a forest with a whole lot of animals... and it's an ancient tree... Rori and I are probably not the first mortal creatures this oak has seen in the act of mating.

"My gratitude belongs to you, there is still more that I can do, now that I see thy heart's desire," the tree goes on, swaying its branches towards us as if motioning us to come closer. "The taint, it burns in you like fire," the tree observes sadly once we stand between its roots and its branches form a canopy above us. It's as if it was sheltering us. "But know thou shall not despair, thy lady is both strong and fair. There is yet hope for you and her and fruits your love shall one day bear."
"What is it talking about? I may be a little paranoid... but I really don't want to wake up tomorrow and find I have branches for arms and an apple dangling from each finger," Rori murmurs. She doesn't let go of my hand and I soothingly brush my thumb against her palm to assure her the tree means no harm. "And why is it rhyming?"

"It has a poet's soul," I offer as an explanation. I feel strange, somewhat stronger and... more alive... younger and older at the same time while I stand in the shade of the tree. According to the look on Rori's face, she's feeling it, too. Then two branches lower like arms and shoo us gently away and onto the narrow forest path. I drag Rori after me as she gawks open-mouthed at my tree friend..

"And once more we say farewell," the tree rumbles as it waves us goodbye. "Your time is precious; do not dwell in the forest for too long. The evil you fight, has grown mighty and strong."
"Tis most peculiar..."

"Huh? Are you talking to me? Can't you pester someone else," I sigh. I am not in the brightest mood this morning as I already enjoyed one of Arl Eamon's lessons about how to behave kingly. He was all like: "Stop looking foolish!" And I was all like: "But that's what I look like!" Well, you get the impression.

And as if that wasn't unpleasant enough, I didn't get to perform my shaving ritual with Rori - or anything else we usually do in the morning - but had to do it all alone in a hurry... err... the shaving... not the other... things... before we left Redcliffe for the Storm Coast. Blast, I didn't even have breakfast! No cheese, no tea, nothing.

Under that circumstances nobody can blame me for not being my amiable adorable charming self, right?

And now Morrigan.

Hmph.

"I was wondering about Wynne and her condition," Morrigan continues as if I hadn't said anything at all.

"Then why do you bother me? She can certainly tell you more about herself than I can," I grumble. Wynne's spirit buddy certainly was the cherry on top of all the troubles of our seemingly endless journey from Brecilian Forest to Redcliffe.

Crossing through the Bannorn we encountered far more darkspawn than before, proving the Grand Oak right. It can't be much longer until the archdemon makes an appearance. Now one would believe the darkspawn was enough for anybody to deal with. But no! We probably killed more headhunters than darkspawn. Loghain is making quite an effort to get rid of Rori and me. Rumours have spread that I am not Maric's son at all but an usurper to be placed on the throne as an Orlesian puppet. It's all a huge conspiracy of the Grey Wardens, the Guerrins and the treacherous Couslands.

I thought it wiser to avoid the inns and taverns, the villages altogether and concentrate on what we are actually here for: The Blight. Sten was totally with me there. But Leliana, Zevran and Rori had it on their agenda to do anything they could to correct that image. And you cannot suffocate a rumour when sitting somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Rori was especially fierce about this. Her parents were heroes, defending Denerim against the Orlesian attack. To now find them disgraced as traitors doesn't sit well with their daughter. And that is quite an understatement.

Much to Oghren's delight we got into so many tavern brawls, every single one of us - with the exception of Shale and Barkley - soon was sporting one black eye... some even two. Rori looked like a racoon for days. Most of the times we just bought the opponents a drink or two afterwards and things got rather merry. Some villages, though, we should better avoid for some time.

And last but not least we all got almost killed by some darkspawn emissary's spell and Wynne did something that included very bright and splendid light like I had never seen before to heal us all in one go and... at once. I mean, I've been healed magically before and that raw power always left me
both amazed and scared. But this... it was so much more... somewhat... creepy... but still it did not feel... dangerous or evil or hostile...

"Isn't she what you templars and Chantry folk would call an abomination? Shouldn't you kill her?" Morrigan inquires.

"I am not a templar. I am a Grey Warden. And Wynne is not an abomination..." Fact is, considering the rules of the Chantry, she absolutely is an abomination. Cullen, being the good and faithful templar he is, would have killed her the moment her condition became obvious. Although I try not to let it show, that spirit thing bothers me greatly, despite me being probably the worst templar ever.

I mean, this is Wynne. The sweet old granny mage! Still, my templar training tells me to watch her closely when my heart tells me no. I feel bad for being so suspicious over her. That spirit inside of her... I feel it is nothing evil... and I wonder if it really is no danger or if it is because this is Wynne. Would I react differently if it was Morrigan? I tell myself no, but at the same time I realize this is a big fat lie.

Maker, why does this all have to be so complicated?

Thankfully it is not I to make the decisions. Rori is too practical to make much of a fuss about this. As long as it helps our cause and is not something awfully evil, she seems to be fine with whatever is inside of Wynne. Okay, fine is an overstatement... she is wary but she has other things on her mind. Like the army we united and my political agenda and the whole thing with the Blight.

"And there I thought an abomination is someone possessed by a spirit or demon from the Fade. I must have been mistaken," Morrigan remarks dryly. "Or is it just you don't want to admit you are not the templar you pretend to be?"

"I am no templar and never wanted to be one, so there's no point in pretending." I stir my horse to trot faster, hoping beyond hope Morrigan will get the hint and leave me alone.

Well, keep dreaming. This just so is not my day!

"So I take it you did not enjoy your templar training?" the witch inquires when her horse appears next to mine.

"That's directed at me, I take it?" I groan as I reach out to secure Rori before she can drop off her horse. She has fallen asleep in her saddle again. The springtime lethargy has a tight grip on her and she's awfully tired lately. It's almost impossible to make her get up in the morning and she keeps dozing off while riding. I let go of Rori when Shale plucks her from her horse and carries her, cradling her like a baby.

"Do you see any others about who have failed at their religious instruction?"

"I didn't fail," I sulk. I mean, I probably would have failed. At least everybody thought I would. Most take their vows at the age of 18 and I was already 19. They kept me waiting for a reason and that reason was... everything I am. "I was recruited into the Grey Wardens."

And I am proud about that. Duncan chose me when I was the last anybody expected to be chosen by anybody or anything. There were other templars who did far better at the tournament. That I was allowed to fight at all and show my skills, was quite a surprise after the Knight-Commander had made it quite clear I was to watch and keep my mouth shut.

"And if you had not been recruited? What would have happened, instead?" Morrigan insists.
Well, if she really has to know...

"I would have turned into a drooling lunatic, slaughtered the grand cleric and run through the streets of Denerim in my small clothes, I guess."

Honestly, I don't think that's so far fetched. At least it gets close to what everybody thought about me at the Chantry. I felt so lost and unwanted there... and then Duncan kinda rescued me and suddenly my life had a meaning. And I found a home and what comes closest to a family for me. It still hurts to have lost Duncan and all the others - although Rori is here to comfort me. She is my family now, my home... my life.

And again I feel like I failed. Shouldn't the Grey Wardens be my life? But with all the king-business, that could be taken from me soon anyway. If I stay alive long enough, that is. The chances are slim. Really, why do I worry at all about the future?

"Your self-awareness does you credit."

"I thought you'd like that," I snort.

When we reach the Storm Coast a few days later, Rori leads us to a bay flanked by steep cliffs. It almost looks as if the land tries to embrace the sea. Only a narrow and steep hidden path leads down towards the small stripe of sand that hardly deserves to be called a beach.

We have to leave the horses with Master Dennet who will bring them back to Redcliffe - not without lecturing me first when I hand the reins of my mare to him. "You still ride as if you had a pole stuck in your shirt, boy..., your Highness," he grumbles. "At least you don't fall off your horse as often as your father. It has to run in the Theirin blood. Whenever Cailan sat on a horse, the mount wandered off to wherever it wanted."

Only when we are halfway down the path, the ships hiding in the bay become visible. Three proud Fereldan warships sailing under the banner of the Mac Eanraigs.

"My mother's family," Rori explains.

During the war against the Orlesian usurper, Bann Fearchar Mac Eanraig, the Storm Giant, and his fleet were what one could call the Fereldan navy. Actually they were more like pirates, searaiders that brought down Orlesian ships. His second daughter Eleanor, later Teyrna Cousland, was called the Seawolf. It is said that Orlesian sailors still wet their pants when they hear her name.

Eleanor had three siblings - and they are... rather unhappy about their sister's fate. At least that's how Arl Eamon put it. According the look on his face, that's the understatement of the year.

"Rori!" A large one-eyed warrior, as huge and broad as a bear - in a kilt - and with a beard that makes Oghren go green with envy, charges us when we reach the beach. He's quite fast for a man with a peg leg and he picks Rori up as if she was a doll and throws her into the air, catching her again easily. "Pup!" he roars.

"Un-uncle Angus!" Rori squeaks. She finds herself whirled around some more before Bann Angus Mac Eanraig smacks a very wet peck to her cheek and hands her over to his younger brother - without putting her down first.

Uncle Ronan's hair and beard are as red as Rori's... hair... Doubt she'd be as cute with a beard. He's almost as tall and broad as his older brother - and the way he hugs his niece, I'm afraid all I'll get back is some Rori-squish. When he finally releases her, he ruffles her hair until they stand on end. Once he's done, Rori gets pounced by her aunt. Agnes is even shorter than Rori. I can hardly believe
the weathered grey haired bird of a woman to be Angus' twin. She has a nasty looking hook for a hand that she keeps waving around in front of Rori's face while she talks. And she talks a lot, pinching Rori's cheeks... with her good hand thankfully.

When Rori finally is returned to me, her hair is a tousled mess and her face flushed.

Only now are the Mac Eanraigs willing to greet the rest of us.

"That's him?" Angus drones when Eamon introduces me to the bann. He scrutinizes me in death silence and with his one eye squinted for what seems an eternity while I squirm and start stammering something about how it is a pleasure to meet him. His glare is so intense and fierce, I am tempted to hide behind Shale. Finally Angus grunts and spits out, almost hitting my boots.

Err...

Rori nudges my side and grins. "He likes you," she whispers proudly.

"Gal," Oghren murmurs, tugging at Rori's sleeve. He looks somewhat pale around the nose. "Ya don't wanna actually use that swimming nutshell, do ya?"

"Blast, yes, I do," Rori answers quite cheerfully as she climbs into one of the boats that carry us to the warships.

"So is it very strange for you, my friend, living in the world of the tall?" Zevran inquires, watching how Oghren wades through the knee-high water to reach the boat. Knee-high for me. The dwarf sinks in to the belly.

"Here I thought I was living in the world of the nosy and the stupid," Oghren grunts. "Bah, I already had a sodding bath this year. Had I known I was in for another so soon, I'd have skipped it."

"It just occurred to me," Zevran merrily goes on when he gives me a hand hauling the soppy dwarf into the boat. "Chairs are too high. Tables are out of reach. using the toilet facilities alone must be a lesson in humility."

"I'm not bloody two feet tall, you swishy nug-licker!" Oghren barks. He very carefully sits down, cursing under his breath when the boat see-saws. Once safely seated, he pulls his soaked boots of his feet.

"Merciful Andraste!" Rori croaks, holding her nose - and she is used to my socks. Admittedly, compared to Oghren's mine smell like a rose blossom.

"And then the light!" Zevran exclaims, motioning towards the sun peeking from behind the clouds. "After all that gloom of Orzammar and the Deep Roads, it's a wonder you don't wander about squinting in pain."

"It is bright, I'll give you that." The dwarf clutches both sides of the boat when Angus and I row it back to the bann's ship, the Roaring Dragon.

"And... oh! Not to have a roof over your head!" Zevran leisurely leans back, dangling one arm over the side of the boat. "Once the ship carries us away from the shore, there won't be anything solid beneath your feet anymore. You must constantly fear that you'll fall up into that vast, endlessly open sky. Or drown in the deep cold water."

The way he describes it, even I begin to feel uneasy...
"Uh..." Oghren uncomfortably shifts on his seat. He takes a sip from his flask. Then another. And a third. In the end he downs the whole stuff in one go.

The elf either doesn't notice the dwarf is sweating by now or he doesn't care. "One day you live within the surety of a mountain, and then gone! Nothing but vacuum, nothing to stop you from being sucked up into the void, nothing to..."

"Stop!" Axe ready, Oghren jumps from his place so abruptly, he makes the boat careen. "One more word and I chop you down where you sit!"

"You are a brave, brave little soldier, my friend." Zevran smiles reassuringly at him and pats his shoulder. Then he motions to the side of the huge warship. "Now, can you climb that rope-ladder to get aboard or should I carry you?"

"You knife-eared pipe-cleaner, you couldn't carry me on your best day," Oghren grunts while he ogles Rori's hindquarters as she climbs the ladder with dexterous grace. That sight has even Zevran shut up for a moment. And it for sure brightens Oghren's mood. "Hehe, aye..." Then Rori pulls herself over the railing and disappears from sight.

"Mmmm," the elf ponders, scrutinizing the dwarf as he returns to their conversation. "Perhaps if you left behind the spirits, all the weapons, and lost about two feet of beard..."

Oghren shoves the elf aside, almost sending him over board, and reaches for the ladder... that dangles about two feet above his head... "Don't say a sodding word!"

With much effort, a lot of swearing, grunting and panting, Zev and I manage to lift Oghren high enough for him to reach the ladder. The sight of watching the dwarf climb is not even half as thrilling as watching Rori. Actually it's not thrilling at all... nope... quite the contrary.

Then it's time for Bann Angus to get back onto his ship and Zevran nudges me and says: "Alistair, my dear friend, what do Fereldans wear under their kilts?"

"Err... I don't know. Never wore one..."

"Alas," Zevran exclaims merrily. "it seems we are going to find out."

Expectantly the elf tilts his head back, following Bann Angus' ascent. And against better knowledge, I - fool that I am - watch, too...

"Andraste's flaming sword!"

"Only if she used a longsword with a rather prominent thick cross-guard..."

"ZEVRAN!!! So not listening... lalalala..."

Ow! Argh! My eyes! No, no, no! Ewww... Maker! Suddenly the archdemon doesn't seem that horrible a beast anymore... not after I've seen that!

"Alas, as I thought. At least that rumour is true," Zevran chuckles.

"You knew it!" He knew it!

"Ah, Alistair, my friend, not that scornful glare again! I didn't know it. Not at all. I've heard about it, like I heard about Fereldans and their dogs. I swear, had I known, truly known, I would have warned... Alas, no, I probably wouldn't have."
Oh, that blasted elf!

I climb on board and find Rori in a conversation with her uncle. She has to tell the story about her parents' death again. It still tears her apart inside. Considering Angus' expression, Howe and Loghain are lucky, he hasn't yet gotten hold of them. It's going to be a hard task for Eamon to persuade the Mac Eanraigs to stay peaceful at the Landsmeet. They demand red meat.

Did I mention that Fereldan nobility has a long and fierce tradition of blood feuds?

"We've been hiding ever since we heard about what happened to Ellie and Bryce," Angus drones. Whenever he says something, he says it loud. "It's like back in the old days when the Orlesians hunted us. They could not find or catch us and Loghain isn't any better at it. I can't believe he turns against his own people. Thought better of him, but, by Andraste's holy knickers, I've been mistaken." He spits out twice at the mentioning of Loghain's name, then adds with grim satisfaction: "Howe has tried to lure us into a trap - but he's not that smart, that treacherous two-faced bastard. A rat has more honour than this son of a bitch."

Uncle Angus gives his niece a bear hug that lifts her off the ground, then ruffles her hair - that she has just combed back with her fingers into not looking like she touched something on Dagna's work desk.

"You are the daughter of the infamous Seawolf," Bann Angus goes on as he shows us around on his ship. "Show these bastards what you got in you, Pup. I know, you are going to make her and me proud."

He is so very sure about this. I wish Eamon only was half as optimistic about me becoming king. It would make things a whole lot easier. At least I like to tell myself that.

Two hours later the pride of the Mac Eanraigs and Couslands, the last hope of Ferelden, the daughter of the infamous Seawolf who has ruled the Waking Sea and brought down her first Orlesian warship at the age of 15, is clutching the railing while she vomits forcefully into the ocean. I have my arm wrapped around her waist to save her from falling over board.

"I am dying," Rori croaks in between her fits of seasickness. Even the dwarf is doing better than her. I feel so sorry for her. Even more so since her uncle, after overcoming his first shock and indignance, teases her mercilessly. He has the whole crew laughing at her and it's so not fair when she's so miserable.

"Pup, you're worse a landlubber than your father," Angus grunts when Rori, her face ashen, finally collapses on the deck. He holds out a hand to help her back to her feet, but she ignores him, clinging to me instead. She can hardly stand alone, but that doesn't stop her from kicking her smirking uncle's manhood.

Perhaps calling her a disgrace and not worth to be her mother's daughter wasn't that funny a joke after all...

Chapter End Notes

When I read Eleanor Cousland's background story in The World of Thedas Vol. 2, I just couldn't resist. I mean, it somehow makes sense for her family to appear. They would not just sit back and pick their noses and wait until it's all over, right?
Eleanor's siblings are not mentioned by name. It is only said her father had four children and Eleanor was his second daughter. So it is only given that she has an older sister.
So... I wanted to write about the arrival in Denerim, but I didn't. This chapter is absolutely Kamille's fault. Her comment about a certain person in a certain attire has led to all this. And then I mentioned it to Notevensorry and she made a first draft of a sketch... and, oh, well... you'll see.

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Whenever writing Angus Mac Eanraig, I so imagine him like a mix of Merida's dad Fergus (Disney's Brave) and Hiccup's dad Stoick (How to train your dragon).

Standing at the railing - as far away as possible from Morrigan who looks as if she's about to follow Rori's example -, I watch Shale fending off sea gulls with her umbrella. Wynne is sharing a drink with some of the sailors. According to the look on Angus' face, Sten is giving him one hundred reasons why Qunari ships are better than Ferelden nutshells.

Oghren has made the mistake to start a conversation with Leliana about ships and the sea. Okay, actually he said something like: "Aye, hehe, you, wet frocks, I, no pants involved. Whatcha think?" Leliana smiled her sweetest smile, Oghren wiggled his eyebrows... and then she said something like: "That reminds me of a story..." The way the dwarf clutches his axe and ogles the water suspiciously, he doesn't enjoy all these tales about sea monsters as much as the bard.

Rori has only recently woken from yet another nap and has now taken seat on a heap of hausers and, sharing with Barkley, devours her third bowl of stew - much to her own and anybody else's surprise.

Zevran next to her has pulled a small wooden box from his backpack and cleans the contents thoroughly, much like I would tend my weapons. While he polishes one of several strangely shaped objects made of gold - a cone with something like a knob at the broad end - Rori curiously picks up one of the other items in the case. It looks as if a leather whip and a feather duster had a baby. She waves it around testingly, then begins to tease me by slapping my hindquarters.

"Hey!" I laugh as she slaps both my hands when I try to grab her weapon. "Stop being silly!" Well, she does not stop - at least not until the elf chuckles and shakes his head in amusement.

"What's so funny?" Rori asks suspiciously, poking Zevran with the feather-duster thing.

"Do you know what that is, oh my sweet Ferelden rose?" the elf coos, not even bothering to hide his smirk.

"Something... dirty?" Rori guesses, now staring at the dubious feather-duster ominously.

"It's a flogger," Zevran explains, placing the smallest of the golden objects back into the box to move on to polishing the next bigger one.

"Uhm..." Rori chews at her lips thoughtfully for a moment. I mouth a 'Don't!' at her, but she ignores me. "What do you use it for?"
"Oh, you got it quite right, my beautiful Fereldan ingenue."

"Oh!" If she didn't blush so beautifully I could be mad at her for having us both tumble yet into another horribly mortifying moment. She's all flustered, not really knowing what to do with that... thing... and her first idea is to hand it to me! I give it back to her at once, and she returns it to me and I practically throw it at her... and finally she passes it to Zevran.

"You can keep it." The elf smiles amiably and Rori again is loaded with the damned device. "You seemed to have quite some fun with it." He winks at both of us and despite our faces already glowing, we manage an even darker shade of pink.

"Uhm, th-thank you, but no, thanks," Rori stammers, trying very unsuccessfully to shove the blasted feather-duster at the elf... then very quickly hides it behind her back when her uncle passes by. Rori switches on a grin so wide and fake, she also could hold up a sign saying 'Guilty!'.

"Ah, Rori, my lovely Fereldan rose," the elf goes on, seemingly oblivious to the stern glares the bann shoots him. "We all know you enjoy some decent spanking every now and then..."

"ZEV!" Rori squeaks, tackling the elf to clap both her hands over his mouth. "Shush! Uncle Angus is... err... a little bit old-fashioned." She waves at her uncle when he turns at the ruckus behind him and frowns at the three of us. I wave, too, and so does Zev. The bann scowls and shakes his head, then seeks out Eamon. Certainly to ask him if he really believes it to be a bright idea to put me on the throne.

"Oh?" The elf grins wickedly.

"Oh?" My own grin is a bit forced and rather worried.

"He almost had Papa keelhauled when he caught him kissing my mother before they were even engaged," Rori whispers.

"And you forgot to mention that because...?" I hiss. The outlook of getting keelhauled is nothing to brighten my mood. Ain't I lucky that I am a shy guy and usually refrain from kissing Rori in public? Very much unlike Rori herself who pounces me wherever and whenever she just feels like it.

"In the end he only challenged him for a duel." Rori soothingly pats my arm. "Papa won. He always joked, Angus probably would have dropped him into the deep sea with a rock strapped to his feet before he let him marry his little sister, if he hadn't proven himself worthy in that fight."

"Okay... and you forgot to mention that because...?"

"Uhm... you know, the Blight and the archdemon and Wynne being an abomination and..." Rori yawns, grins sheepishly and shrugs.

"It's only three more days until we reach Denerim," Zevran comforts me. "You will manage to behave."

"Hey! I... err... that's not... I always behave!"

"You are right, my dear friend, I am talking to the wrong person." The elf amiably wraps his arm around Rori's shoulder. "Three days. You can do it. I do believe in you."

"You act as if I got nothing else on my mind," Rori pouts, snatching the flogger from the elf when he points it at her.
"Pup, can I have a word with you... what's that?" Uncle Angus has returned, announced by the tock-tock of his peg leg on the wooden deck, and with some interest takes Zevran's dirty toy from his niece.

"That's a flo..." the elf begins.

"Fly flap!" Rori cries. "It's a fly flap." She glares daggers at Zevran as she takes her uncle by his arm to lead him away. "So, you wanted to talk to me, Uncle Angus?" she asks ever so sweetly. Snatching the flogger from the bann, she thrusts it at me and I am left standing there with this... thing... and the smirking elf.

I am somewhat tempted to just drop it into the water... but... all those images that pop up in my mind when I look at it... the leather is rather soft and smooth, almost made as much for a caress as for... uhm... other things... According to that smug look on the elf's face, he so knows what's on my treacherous mind. I blush, clear my throat, clear it again... Something distracting, something, something... "So I have a question for you, Zevran." I finally blurt out, the blasted flogger still in my hand. "You're here, at least in part, to get away from the Crows, right?"

"That is indeed true." Zevran chuckles when I attempt to stuff Rori's fly flap into her backpack. Guess what I find! The golem control rod. Why in the name of the Maker she still carries it around is completely beyond me.

"Aw," the elf chuckles. "That's how my toy collection started, too."

"Wh-what? I... no... we don't... that's really nothing... we never..." I stammer, wondering what one could possibly do with a broken golem control rod shaped like... oh!... OH!... Well... uhm... it could come in handy in some ways...

Seeing that look on the elf's face, he so knows it's dawning on me. I hurry on before he can say something I so do not want to hear because it's bound to be something awfully dirty and depraved and I am going to blush down to my navel... or further.

"S-so when this is over, what do you intend to do with yourself? You can't go back to Antiva, I assume."

"What I do depends in large part upon your lovely fellow Grey Warden. I am not a free man, as it were." He neither sounds nor looks devastated.

"Yes, yes, but what if you could do whatever you wanted? I mean, Rori is not going to make you do anything you don't want to do..."

"Now isn't that a pity?"

"Huh?"

"Ah, Alistair, my clueless friend... nevermind." Zevran shakes his head in amusement. "What makes you think I intend to go anywhere?"

"So you do intend to go back to the Crows?" I wonder.

I mean, this Blight won't last forever... hopefully. And as fortune favour fools we all actually should have at least some chance to survive... hopefully. So, one has to have plans. Okay, I don't have plans but that's because my future includes all this king business and I really do not want to think about it too much. It scares me right out of my mind, more than the archdemon does. Or at least in a different way. I somehow feel more capable of slaying that oversized tainted darkspawn lizard than to rule a
"Oh, I don't know" Zevran ponders. "Aren't you going to be king? Perhaps you have people you need killed?"

"I probably do, yes." According to what Leliana tells me about politics, the list will be quite long. Life as a king is certainly not going to be boring.

"See?" Zevran, all amiable, slaps my back. It still makes me jump. I just can't get over it that he's a freaking assassin. "It's that sort of thinking that makes me think I have a future in this fine country of yours."

"That's assuming I would hire you." The elf isn't exactly the best assassin. Not that I've seen many. Luckily he is probably the only one I've ever met when acting as a professional. As he so failed to murder me, gave away all the details about his employer and his contract when asked - I mean, Rori didn't even threaten him, he just told us the whole tale and more! - and then switched alliances to join his targets and their cause... Nope, sorry, Zevran so wouldn't be my first choice.

"That's the lovely thing about kings," the elf laughs. "They make for good business, as the client or the target."

"And people wonder why someone might not want to be king," I mutter. Zevran, he's nobody to be really worried about - one because... well, he failed once, I doubt he'd get it done given a second try. Two, he might be tempted by gold to harm me, but never Rori. Still, he's not the only assassin out there and this game of thrones we play, it's the most dangerous favourite pastime. That much I figured from listening to Leliana's story. ... and from all the blasted dreck Loghain came up with to murder his king and gain control over Ferelden... and from the Couslands' fate, the downfall of the most important, most powerful noble family of Ferelden next to the king.

The ships berth in a sheltered bay when night falls. Eamon rather would make haste and not delay our arrival at Denerim any longer. But Bann Mac Eanraig insists to wait for the reinforcement of two more ships of his fleet, sailed by some of Rori's cousins.

"That son of a bitch Howe has hired pirates to hunt us down. That's how King Loghain..." Angus spits onto the wooden floor three times. "... uses our tax money. In case we meet some of Howe's new buddies, I'd rather have some backup to make sure this young fellow here..." He slams his hand down on my back with a force that almost makes me topple over. "... arrives save and sound to take back his throne from that treacherous bastard."

What saves me from falling is Uncle Angus squeezing me in a firm headlock and ruffling my hair with his free hand. I am quite vain when it comes to my hair. I have a comb and I do use it. So having the human version of an ogre mess it up, is nothing I am particularly happy about. In addition I am not rather fond of finding my face pressed to another man's rather sweaty armpit. I am tempted to ask Barkley for licking my face clean like Rori does when she's all covered in gore. Dog drool seems the lesser of two evils when compared to Uncle Angus' prespiration. And all that doesn't even include the fact that I can hardly breathe anymore...

"Your Highness," Angus thunders once he decides to release me - after Rori kindly pointed out to him my face was beginning to turn blue. "Allow me to offer my cabin to you as the other... lodging facilities aren't suitable for my royal guest."

"Err... I really... that's not necessary..." Hey, thanks to Lady Isolde I slept in the kennels with the dogs whenever the arl spent the winter in Denerim. And in Redcliffe it was the stables. At the Chantry I shared a dormitory crammed with bunk beds with two dozen boys. And ever since Ostagar
it was a tent somewhere in the middle of nowhere or the rocky ground in the Deep Roads. "Maybe the lady..."

"Tougher then he looks, huh?" Angus slaps his huge palm on my back again. "And a gentleman. Good on you, son."

And that's how I end up in the same quarters as the soldiers, trying to get comfortable in a hammock. Above me there's Oghren, farting in his sleep. The smell in the sleeping quarters is already bad enough without adding Oghren and my socks. Sten's not exactly smelling like a rose, too. He snores on the ground as he's too large for any hammock. Leliana keeps telling herself this is not worse than the Deep Roads. Morrigan stays on deck. Smart decision. The only one who gets to sleep in a bed is Rori. She called me a fool for having turned down Angus' offer and I am beginning to think she might be right about that.

In the end I decide, it's better on deck than down here and after some struggling finally manage to fall out of my hammock and stumble up the stairs. I am greeted by a velvet sky, midnight blue sprinkled with tiny shiny dots. That's for sure a prettier sight than Oghren's hairy buttocks.

The air is better, too. Much better. Fresh and salty. The moon illuminates the whole scene of three ships in a bay. It all looks a bit like a rather kitschy painting. All that is missing is a handsome young man and a beautiful young woman in an romantic encounter and it would match the cover of the book Wynne currently reads.

"Alistair?"

I smile, turning at the sound of the voice coming from the shadows at the bow of the ship. "Hey kitten, shouldn't you be fast asleep, enjoying the comfort of the bed your uncle gave up to you?"

"It's not that comfortable with Uncle Angus sleeping on the sofa in the very same cabin," Rori pouts. "He's such a chaperon. Look at what he made me wear!" To show me, Rori climbs out of the rowing boat she has chosen to turn into a cozy nest of blankets and furs for herself and Barkley.

"Err..." I like her better in my shirts. This... nightgown has far too many quillings and... "Is that baby bunnies?" They are pink and they hop in a row of terrible cuteness around the hem of the nightdress.

"It belongs to Auntie Agnes," Rori sighs. "Angus rowed to her ship personally to get it for me as he doesn't think a man's shirt a proper night attire for a young noble lady. And I have to keep the curtains around the bed closed so that nobody can see me and I cannot see anybody and... it's all very complicated."

"I see." I chuckle.

"Uncle Angus always makes a fuss, but... now Mama and Papa are dead and nobody knows for sure what happened to Fergus... He exaggerates it, really. He tries to be my father, mother, brother and uncle in one - and it's driving me crazy!" Rori bangs her forehead against my shoulder repeatedly.

"You have my sympathy." I grin, wrapping my arms around her - after checking that nobody is watching us. I can do without Uncle Angus' special treatment for his ladies' admirers.

"His snoring is worse than Oghren's and Sten's duets," Rori mumbles into my shirt as she snuggles closer. That feeling of her warm, soft body pressed against mine erases any fear of Uncle Angus. "And... I miss you." She nuzzles my neck, then tiptoes to kiss me.

"What about your uncle?" I manage a half-hearted protest, whispered against the smoothness of her lips. At that point kissing is already beyond innocent and I am already half inside Rori's boat nest.
"Fast asleep," Rori assures me, her nimble fingers untying the breeches of my pants while I shed out of my shirt and stumble backwards into the boat. Rori makes short work of my pants and tosses them aside... and over the railing.

"That was my best pants!" I gasp.

"That was your only pants," Rori corrects me, grinning sheepishly when I glare at her.

"You think that's funny?" I growl, ready to go into a huff... but then Rori sheds out of that nightmare of a nightdress and has it follow my pants. The silver moonlight makes her pale skin glow softly. Maker's Breath! She is so adorably beautiful. Who cares about pants when there's a ravishing woman straddling him? I certainly don't. Pants would be quite an hindrance at the moment anyway...

Making love to Rori in that rowing boat on deck of her uncle's ship, I am completely oblivious to anything but her and me with our bodies united in the pleasure we give to each other. This ship could sink and we wouldn't notice...

... or Uncle Angus could sneak upon us despite the tock-tock of his peg leg...

I have just rolled Rori around to be on top of her when someone twists my earlap painfully as if I was a misbehaving little boy, and never losening his grip pulls me away.

"You thrice-cursed whorespawn!"

Angus is shouting at the top of his voice - mostly obscenities directed at me -, Rori is screaming - mostly at her uncle to let go of me-, I am howling - mostly at Angus to release my ear.

"Son of a bitch! I will drown you like the dog you are!" Angus roars as he drags me - stark naked as I am - across the deck towards the railing. His announcement doesn't help much to make me feel any better.

"No!" Rori yells, clinging to her uncle's arm without much success in stopping him. He's a giant of a man and he is on a mission. A naked niece dangling from his arm is not making much of a difference when there's a task to be completed. He finally lets go of me when Rori sinks her teeth into his arm. Roaring like a wounded bear, he throws his niece aside and comes after me, sword in hand. That's what I call out of the frying pan, into the fire.

"Run!" Rori shouts. As if I needed anybody telling me. I am already fleeing across the deck with Angus at my heels and Rori chasing after her uncle. Barkley thinks this is all a funny game and barks happily at all three of us.

"How dare you dishonour my niece! You two-faced bastard!" The sword crashes against a mast, only two inches above my head. I squeak like a frightened piglet and dart away, seeking refuge behind Shale.

"Stop! Leave him alone, Uncle Angus! I love him!" Rori tries to stop the frenzied bann from chasing me around the golem for several rounds.

"Are you married?" Angus grunts.

"Of course not!"

"Then he will die!" Angus decides, coming once more after me with his sword raised.

"Ohhhh! Stop being so blimpish!" Rori yells, stomping her foot on the ground. "If I am old enough
to kill darkspawn, I'm also old enough to have sex!"

"You are not unless you are married!" Angus insists.

"Mac Eanraig! He's the last of the Theirins!" Eamon - only wearing his nightshirt - shouts as he joins in the merry tag play.

"Shall I crush its head?" Shale helpfully offers.

"Yes!" I cry when Angus chases my naked self past the by now assembled audience. It certainly is one of the most humiliating moments of my life. Maybe I should just allow that madman to put an end to my suffering before the neverending shame can bring me down.

"No!" Rori breathes and Shale just shrugs in confusion.

Angus has me cornered with my back against the railing, his sword raised, he roars in triumph. I back away when there's nowhere to go and tumble over the railing backwards, the same moment as Rori tackles her uncle. The blow goes amiss when the furious bann is thrown out of balance by his naked niece clinging to his back.

I'm not really prepared for hitting the icy water and swallow far too much of it. I am still trying to flail my way back to the surface when someone pulls my head out of the water.

"Stop flailing!" Rori yells into my ear.

"I can swim on my own," I splutter and spit. Being rescued by a petite female isn't helping with my manly feelings. I mean, it's real sweet she jumped in right after me. Still, I'd look less like a complete loser if I had managed to rescue myself. Oh happy day!

Angus only wants to pull Rori out of the water but Eamon insists I shouldn't be left to drown in the Waking Sea. How very considerable of him.

"He will marry her. Here and now." Bann Mac Eanraig argues, not willing to let me back on board without resurrecting his niece's soiled reputation. So Rori and I tread water while two old men argue about what's absolutely none of their business.

"Don't be a fool, Mac Eanraig. That's not his decision," Eamon snorts.

"It is not?" I mumble.

"He's going to be king," Eamon points out. "You know as well as I do, that his marriage will be a political issue. Your niece may be a possible candidate but she is not the only one."

"Hello?" Rori mutters. "We can hear you, you know!"

"Your prince should have thought about that before he dishonoured my niece!" Bann Angus grunts.

"Knowing your niece, I'm not sure it's him you should blame."

"What's that, Eamon? You saying my niece is a whore?" the peg legged giant roars. I expect Eamon to join Rori and me anytime soon if he goes on like that.

"I said nothing like that, Angus," Eamon sighs unnervedly. "We have to decide what's best for Ferelden. Our personal desires and feelings have no room when the whole kingdom and all its people are at stake."
"Oh Maker! Listen to him," Rori groans. "He sounds like Wynne!" She doesn't like this at all. She's not alone there. I don't like it either.

"Best I don't become king," I whisper. I'm not going to add 'Told you so!' although it's tempting. In my opinion Rori always was too eager on the king campaign. "I don't want to anyway. Then we can stay together and happily slay darkspawn together happy ever after."

Smiling Rori somehow manages to kiss me without drowning us both. If the water wasn't that awfully cold and deep, this could turn into something real... exciting. As it is, we are forced to break the kiss soon.

"And who else should rule? I don't see an alternative." Rori whispers.

"You forget about Anora," I point out, coughing through half of the sentence when I swallow some more water. "She's a good queen."

"We do not know where Anora stands. Have you forgotten the letters we found in Ostagar? How Empress Celene addressed Cailan? I still believe they planned to marry. If Anora knew anything about that, she could also be part of her father's treachery."

Finally the arl and the bann have come to a conclusion and a rope ladder is dropped to get us back on board.

"As you said: we do not know about her. Perhaps you should consider giving her a chance?"

"As if my opinion mattered!" Rori snorts as she begins to climb the rope ladder. It's quite a sight considering she is naked and the moon is bright enough to illuminate all the details. "In the end nobody is going to ask you or me who shall be king or queen."

On board we are greeted with stern and scornful glares, some towels and in my case a kilt.

"What's that for?"

"Can't have you fight your duel starkers," Angus growls, shoving my sword at me as soon as I have managed to put on the kilt with Rori's help.

"Err... duel?"

"Really, Uncle, it's none of your business who I sleep with," Rori snaps.

"Wrong, young lady! Your father is dead. Your mother is dead. Your brother is missing. That makes me the one responsible for you." Ignoring any further protest he whirls his sword around testingly. "Eamon said I am not allowed to cause permanent damage. So this is a fight for first blood. Draw your weapon, boy."

I am about to tell him no. I mean, hello? Two grown up men, naked but for a skirt, beating each other up over a woman who seems very much capable of making her own choices. I've been challenged before by Sten and it was as pointless as this duel. But then I recall what Rori told me about her father duelling Angus and how it earnt him his respect... Oh, blast it!

"If I win, you will stay away from my niece...," Angus goes on.

Now I do open my mouth to protest but Rori beats me to it. "And how are you going to make sure I stay away from him?" she hisses. "Are you going to fight me, too?"
"You have a big mouth, girl. Just like your mother. Nobody could tame her. Never did as she was told, always had to have it her way."

"And what makes you think I am different?" Rori, arms akimbo, doesn't back down when her uncle tries his stern glare on her. She just stares back defiantly.

"Fine. I fight you, too, Pup," Angus grumbles, sounding as if he talked to a stubborn child. "You lose, you do as you are told."

"You have to beat Alistair first," Rori points out. "Good luck. You'll need it."

"Thank you," I mutter.

"I was talking to Angus," Rori says, wrapping her arms around my neck to kiss me. And that's some kiss! She certainly makes her point, much to her uncle's and Eamon's dismay.

When I reach out to shake his hand before the duel begins, Bann Mac Eanraig slaps it away and spits onto the ground.

"Uncle Angus!" Rori hisses. "Shake on it!" Grumbling the huge searaider obeys - and squeezes my fingers so hard, he almost breaks them.

To the sound of drums the fight begins... just, I don't get it.

I still examine my battered hand when Angus comes for me, roaring like a bear as he swings his sword. I can lift mine just in time to block his blow. With the next frenzied hits he forces me to retreat and dodge. Once I recover from the first surprise, it's a bit easier to fend him off.

Sword in hand, Angus and I circle each other inside the fighting ground marked by soldiers with torches.

I squint my eyes, scrutinizing my opponent. He's stronger, taller and heavier than I am, has more experience and is not as slow as one would think considering he has a piece of wood for a leg. And he's determined to stomp me into the ground. He's also older, far too cocksure and I have more to lose.

Next time he lunges himself at me, I dive forwards, avoiding his blade and with a sidestep bring mine down on his bare arm. It's no more than a small cut. But I do not need to really hurt him. All I have to do is draw blood.

Angus is still standing there, staring at his arm stupidly when I bow to him, not even caring to hide the smug grin on my face. Then I turn to accept my reward, waiting for me in form of the most ravishing young woman I have ever met.

"This is not yet over," Angus grunts, cutting the air between Rori and me with his sword to keep us apart. "I have challenged you, too, Pup. You lose, you do as you are told, remember?"

By the look on Rori's face Angus is making the biggest mistake of his life. "Give me my sword," she growls as she steps into the ring formed by Angus' soldiers.

"Don't you want to get dressed..." her uncle begins.

"No!"

Rori only wears a towel and she has to clutch it with one hand to keep it from slipping. Confident of
his victory, Angus smirks... until Rori attacks. Three fast, well-aimed blows and all three straps fastening Angus' kilt to Angus are cut. The kilt drops to the ground and so does Angus' sword when, swearing under his breath, he claps both hands over his now very visible most private parts. No more than five seconds and a few fast cuts later Uncle Angus finds the word NO engraved into the skin of his hairy chest.

"Here's a piece of information for you, Uncle Angus - and for anybody else," Rori says calmly, pointing her sword at her uncle. "Alistair's and my relationship is none of your blasted business. He and I are the only ones to make any decisions when it comes to this relationship. You can have your own opinion about us as long as you don't assume he or I should give a damn. Mind your own business and leave us the fuck alone."

Thus said, she turns on her heels, grabs me by the front of my kilt, pulls me flash against her and then she kisses me.

"Bully for you, kitten! You gave him a good dressing-down," I chuckle, hugging her close to me.

"Sod it all!" Bann Mac Eanraig murmurs as he picks up his kilt. "Same spitfire as her mother."
Giving Loghain a One-Finger-Salute

Chapter Notes

In case you want to take a look at the banners, here's the links. The Mac Eanraig banner I had to make up as Bioware gives no information.

Theirin:
http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Theirin_family

Cousland:
http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Cousland_family

Guerrin:
http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Guerrin

Grey Wardens:
http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Heraldry:_Grey_Wardens

Our arrival at Denerim is a well planned choreography. Actually it's a whole show, costumes and music included.

With the reinforecment it's an armada of five ships approaching Denerim in V formation, with Bann Angus Mac Eanraig's Roaring Dragon at the front, the sails bearing the red, gold and white of the royal family, the mabari banner of the Theirins proudly blowing in the wind.

Then follows Agnes Mac Eanraig with Andraste's Glory, her sails blue and silver and the Cousland laurel wreaths high on her masts. Ronan's Soggy Mabari sports the colours of the Guerrins and he flys the flag of Redcliffe. Behind them Angus' daughter Juliana has her Storm Witch sail under the Griffon flag. The last one is Agnes' son Tracy, his Stingray presenting the blue and green of the Mac Eanraigs. Their banner is a fist holding a trident - malicious gossip has it that it's a dungfork instead.

It's certainly an impressive sight, majestic and grand...

"It's like flipping Loghain the bird," Rori says, sounding rather pleased. Even her strange on-and-off seasickness cannot rain on her parade today.

For her this is all about the beginning of the end of Rendon Howe.

I imagine how Loghain sits there high above the city in the palace of Denerim and has an open sight to the sea... and the armada sailing into the harbour of his capital.

That's almost worth all this.

Almost.

For me this is all about the beginning of the end of my life as just Alistair.

"Why can't we just enter the city like anybody else?" I ask sullenly while Bann Castor Bronach, Rori's old buddy, and Herren, grumpy as always and not at all pleased to find himself on board of a ship, help me with my brandnew Wade armour. Castor calls it a masterpiece of understatement, meaning Eamon forbade him to order an ornamental parade armour but forced him and Wade to think of something practical. Bless Eamon! In my opinion it's still too much gold and engravings.
"Because you are not anybody else," Castor patiently explains, hurrying to help Rori fasten the griffon brooch on her midnight blue cape. It's rimmed in silver embroidery and perfectly matches her equally coloured blouse with the silver ties and the tiny embroidered griffons. On her head she wears a silver laurel wreath. Castor calls this the perfect balance between her noble heritage and her mission. "And you do look gorgeous, darling," he adds.

That at least we can agree on.

"Is it really wise to make such a show with that much pomp?" I grumble, looking so sour I even beat Herren who is polishing my armour, wiping off the last fingerprints. I am so burnished from head to toe, even Shale thinks I'm pretty. Next she's going to stuff me into her bag where she has all her shiny things and her cuddly stone Herbert.

"Alistair, my dear royal friend, nobody has ever become king because of their humility," Zevran points out.

Not that I really want to become king. I mean, I know about my responsibility and that it's the only way to challenge Loghain and possibly defeat him. Still, I hope that I will get spared, somehow. It all seems so larger than life when I am just an insignificant fool.

"But what if I don't become king?"

"Then your shiny armour is the last thing you should be worrying about," the elf remarks cheerfully. "Usually heirs to the throne who don't win it, don't live long enough to regret their mistakes."

"How comforting. Now I indeed do feel better."

Next to Rori and me being dressed up, there's five ship loads of soldiers, mostly men in kilts, and a bagpipe and drums band - also in kilts. They make a hellish noise when we land, playing the rather popular tune of The Soldier and the Seawolf. I have to admit, it's a rather smart move, since it was Eleanor Mac Eanraig and Bryce Cousland who defended Denerim against the Orlesian attack when the Orlesians tried to reconquer the city from the sea. There's still a lot of people in Denerim who remember how the Seawolf's fleet formed a line of protection and defeated the Orlesians. And those who haven't been there have heard the tales and this song.

Our rather noisy and flamboyant entry bestows us a crowd gathered at the pier. According to Eamon, this is a critical moment. We do not know for sure how they will react. We've been marked kingslayers and traitors after all. All this could blow up in our faces and still I am meant to mount a white horse and ride down the gangway right behind the musicians and a guard of honour.

"Err... Arl Eamon... you do recall my riding skills, don't you?" I mutter as I sit on the horse and ogle down that narrow piece of wood that leads from the ship to safely firm ground. "I mean, you've heard what Master Dennet said back then, right? May I point out that I haven't made much of an improvement?" My chances to fall off the horse and drown in the port basin are several times higher than actually becoming king.

And again nobody is listening to me. Angus slaps the back of the horse and it starts down the gangway with me clinging to it and hoping beyond hope that the animal knows what it's doing because I for sure do not.

Rori is right behind me on another white horse. Followed by Eamon and Angus, also on horseback. There's another honour guard, more soldiers, more musicians... it's a whole Maker forsaken parade.
Eamon says I should appear majestic with an air of earnestness and grandeur. I almost laugh out loud at that. I am a born fool and so, sweating heavily in my silly armor, I find myself grinning like a retard and wave at the people lining both sides of the road. Most people wave back and cheer, some scrutinize us with stern glares. I try to read from their expressions if they can see through the mask, see the insignificant small man in that shiny armour that he wears like a pretty shell. It's like running the gauntlet and I feel like screaming inside.

"I cannot do that," I breathe when Rori appears next to me as soon as the streets widen. "It's such a farce!" She smiles reassuringly at me, takes my hand in hers and doesn't let go anymore, despite Eamon hissing at us from behind.

Maker, bless that girl!

Reminding me that I am not alone, Rori with her own radiance gives me strength and at least some confidence. And suddenly a spark leaps over and creates an excitement that enfolds the people like a wave. They chime in on the songs, chant Rori's and my name - and they bow or incline their heads in a display of respect.

It's amazing. Overwhelming. And so damn creepy.

I'm still more than relieved when we finally arrive at the Guerrin estate. Eamon is quite pleased with how Denerim reacted on us. "We tested the waters and it turned out far better than I expected," the Arl admits. "Denerim is the heart and soul of Ferelden. As stubborn as a mabari and as good to have on your side. If we defeat Loghain here, the rest of the nation will follow us."

"Nobody tried to murder us," Rori observes, sounding rather amazed.

"Not yet," Zevran says cheerfully, wrapping one arm around Rori's shoulder, the other around my waist. "I'm sure they won't leave you waiting for too long."

"You did well, Alistair," Eamon goes on, laying his hand on my shoulder in a gesture of pride. "There's more of your father in you than you want to believe."

I roll my eyes behind his back, causing Rori to giggle - until Eamon turns and silences her with a stern glare.

Don't get me wrong, his praise means much to me - usually. As a child I'd have done anything to make him proud of me. Today, however, I don't feel like I've done anything that deserves to be noticed. It's all about me being Maric's son. That's nothing I achieved. It's the ghost of the past they see in me. And it scares me... because the time will come, when I cannot hide anymore, when their onlook will focus on me. They will still compare me to Maric the Saviour - and how should I ever live up to the king who freed Ferelden from the Orlesian usurpers?

"I called in the Landsmeet. I struck the first," Eamon goes on as the Mac Eanraigs, Leliana, Zevran, Rori and I meet him in his study. Eamon rather would have left the bard and the elf out but Rori insists, they know how to play the political game. Especially Leliana has become her and my most important advisor.

"A gathering of some noble retards? That's what you call a strike?" Angus grunts and rams his throwing axe into the tabletop. It's a really fine table with the banners of all noble families of Ferelden engraved. The blade of Angus' axe splits right through that of the Mac Tirs. "Here, that's what I call a strike," he adds with deeply felt satisfaction.

I can't get rid of the impression that the sophistication Eleanor Cousland was known for has a lot to
do with the choice of her husband.

"Angus," Eamon begins as if he was talking to a retard. "We already talked about that - several times. We do not have the strength to fight Loghain and his allies - not with a Blight taking place at the same time."

"Blasted darkspawn," Angus Mac Eanraig mumbles into his beard while pulling his axe from the now ruined table. "Sorry 'bout the table, Eamon. I'll cover the damage."

"The advantage for the moment is ours." Eamon chooses to ignore the huge kilt-wearing warrior. "Loghain has little choice but to oppose us directly. He will strike back at us. The only question that remains, is how soon?"

"And how?" Rori adds thoughtfully. "What possibilities does he have to discredit Alistair and the rest of us? He tried to mark us traitors. But how many will believe the story of the Orlesian threat when the darkspawn is knocking down their front doors? He will have to find another way to destroy us."

"Killing you sounds like the easiest way to get rid of the threat you are," Zevran points out.

"It also could cause the civil war to consume Ferelden even before the darkspawn does," Leliana comments. "If Loghain wants to unite the nobility of Ferelden, your deaths alone won't do the magic."

"You have to be careful in whatever you say or do," Eamon advises Rori and me. Then turns to the Mac Eanraigs. "You, too! The last thing we need is a tavern brawl in the Gnawed Noble because someone said something disrespectful about Eleanor..."

Angus and Ronan Mac Eanraig look like two boys who got their most favourite toys confiscated and now have to go to bed early and without a dessert.

"But..." Angus begins sullenly.

"No! That's exactly what Loghain is waiting for."

A knock at the door and the entry of an elven servant suffocate any further discussion, although it's quite clear Angus isn't yet finished.

"Lord Eamon, guests have arrived. King Loghain, Teyrn Howe and...," the servant begins timidly.

"TEYRN HOWE!" Angus roars, his face crimson with fury, and jumps from his chair so quickly that he knocks it over. I am actually surprised there's no smoke billowing from his ears. "I'm going to turn that thrice-cursed whorespawn into a pulp even his mother won't recognize anymore! TEYRN MY ASS!"

He's already out of the door, shouting obscenities at the top of his voice, when Eamon hurries after him, bellowing at his guards to stop the rampant bann. Agnes is at his heels, yelling at her twin to calm down and only for once make use of his brain. They all have their hands full, stopping Bann Mac Eanraig before the huge searaider can storm into Eamon's hall and turn Howe into something squishy.

"Err... I... will let the guests know, they will be shown to the hall... soon, yes?" the elven servant asks timidly, looking questioningly at me. I shrug and grin sheepishly, causing the poor servant some more despair. "Not helpful," he mutters as he hurries out of the room. "So not helpful!"
Rori and I are left back in the study.

Loghain is out there and I know that I will have to face him. There's no way around it. Whatever I thought this would feel like, I am at awe how strangely calm I am, like in battle when instinct and experience take over, leaving no room for thoughts.

Rori is far from being calm. She just stands there with her fists clenched at her sides, very silent, awfully pale and so terribly upset, she's shaking. Her eyes are wide and round and glittering with tears, she angrily tries to blink back. The man who has murdered her mother and father, her little nephew and sister-in-law, who has destroyed her home, he has come to meet her.

I very much doubt, it's a coincidence that Loghain has brought Howe here. The Mac Eanraigs aren't exactly known for their calm mannerism and deliberateness. The battle has begun. This is Mac Tir's counterstrike.

I catch Rori by her wrist when she unsheathes her dagger. She glares at me with a determined ferocity in her eyes and tries to pull free from my grasp. "Let go, Alistair!" she hisses, her voice raw and choked. "I will cut his black heart from his chest! I will..."

Of course I do not let go of her. She's not able to think straight. "Rori, please, that's what Loghain is hoping for. Can't you see, he brings Howe here to push you to perform a hasty action?" I beseech her. "He will use this against you, against me, marking our attempt to disempower him as an act of hateful revenge."

The tears stream down her face and she sobs. "I don't care," she wails. Her hand is trembling so badly, she can hardly hold the dagger.

"Rubbish!"

"Alistair," she cries. "I can't... I cannot... look into his face and... I cannot do that... meet him... face him..."

Maker! She's crying so hard, she can hardly breathe. I disarm her before I wrap her in an embrace, holding her until her sobbing stops. She sniffs and wipes her nose on her sleeve. Chuckling, I sacrifice yet another handkerchief for her.

Rori noisily blows her nose. "I've imagined this a thousand times," she admits meekly. "Where it would be, how it would be, what I would say, what it would feel like... and it's nothing like that. It hurts so much."

"Pup," I whisper into her ear and she stiffens. I never call her that. It's the endearment her family uses for her. For me, she's my kitten. It never felt right to me to address her like her family did. But now I do. Taking her face into my hands, I make her look at me."You are Rori Elissa Cousland, Lady of Highever, daughter of Teyrn Bryce and Teyrna Eleanor Cousland. Show them the Couslands are made of sterner stuff. You can do this."

"I... I feel, like I'm going to be nauseous," Rori mutters, slumping down on a chair. Not exactly the reaction I was hoping for.

"Oh... okay, that might not make for such an imposing impression. I mean, Howe for sure is enough to make one puke. And then Loghain in additon... but perhaps you could try a less drastic approach..."

Eamon appears at the door of his study. "Our arrival has made more of an impression than I thought possible if it has Loghain come running here so fast. Are you ready? We shouldn't let Loghain wait
much longer." One look at Rori and he decides a few minutes won't hurt. "Wash your face, girl. That's exactly how Loghain and Howe want to see you. You don't want to give them satisfaction, do you?"

That works.

"Blast, no!" Rori hisses, visibly pulling herself together. She leaves the room, repeatedly muttering to herself under her breath: "I'm a Cousland. I can do this."

For her that's okay. I, however, don't feel much like giving myself a boost with my Theirin heritage. Right now it's more of a burden than it has ever been before.

"Alistair..." Rori whispers when five minutes later we are all more or less ready and assembled in the hall for a meet and greet with Loghain and Howe. My beloved fellow Grey Warden still looks a bit pale, but she regained her composure.

"I'm right here, Pup," I reassure her.

"We're all here," Zevran adds. "I - for example - are going to be over there in the shadows. Just in case you need someone to get instantly assassinated."

"Point out a head, I'll crush it," Shale rumbles, punching her fist at her palm.

"Apparently everyone seems to agree that a Blight is the perfect time to start killing each other. Marvelous, really," Morrigan complains.

"Let's just hope we'll be the last ones standing," I murmur.

"This - again - is not the archdemon," Sten sighs.

"But it's getting quite close," Rori teases the exasperated Qunari.

"Okay, my darlings, remember what I told you. Calm. Composed. Cunning. And we'll work it out somehow," Leliana says as if this was some stage project of the local amateur theatrical troupe. And I'm the nerd who always forgets his lines.

"No drinks?" Oghren grunts. "No wonder you all act as if you got a sodding stick up your arse. Some ale would release a lot of tension. I know what I'm talking about."

"Doubt you can drink Howe pretty," Angus mutters but accepts Oghren's flask anyway. He's the only one the dwarf shares with as they have become quite close drinking buddies within the few days travelling together.

"One at least can give it a try," Wynne chuckles. "He might not become prettier but at least the time wasted with him got a little merrier. Attention now, here they come."

Loghain doesn't show up with an honour guard in tow. It's only him, Howe and a female knight. Boy, regarding Loghain's expression, pissed off calls for a whole new definition. Someone ruined his day and it was us.

"Loghain," Eamon greets the self-announced king without showing him the respect his position calls for. None of us does. Rori holds her head up high. Angus has crossed his arms in front of his chest and glowers at Howe in a way that makes the treacherous bastard squirm. All that doesn't help much with Loghain's mood. "This is an... honour... that the regent would find time to greet me personally."
"How could I not welcome a man so important as to call every lord in Ferelden away from his estates while a Blight claws at our land," Loghain remarks sarcastically.

"The Blight is why I am here. With Cailan dead, Ferelden must have a king to lead it against the darkspawn," Eamon retorts.

"Ferelden has a strong leader," Loghain declares. "Its queen and I lead her armies."

"Well, we've already seen where you lead them," Rori comments icily. "Away from the battlefield."

"Ah, the Grey Warden recruit." Loghain finally cares to take notice of the last of the Couslands. "I thought we might meet again. You have my sympathies of what happened to your order. It is unfortunate that they chose to turn against Ferelden."

"Don't act as if you don't know my name, Lord Loghain," Rori snorts, her eyes blazing with fury. Arms crossed in front of her chest, she so isn't impressed by the way Loghain has stepped closer to tower over her. Sorry, Loghain, but intimidation doesn't work on Gingersnaps. "Your sympathies... come from a man who has spun a web of lies to keep his own treason a secret. The Grey Wardens were down there next to their king and they died defending him and Ferelden. You, however, are here, alive and still kicking and with the nerve to try and feed me this bullshit we both know isn't true."

"You should curb your tongue," Loghain growls. "This is my city and no safe place to speak treason for anyone."

"The truth doesn't suit you? Oh, I'm so terribly sorry," Rori retorts. She doesn't look sorry at all. "Tell me, Loghain, how are you going to stop me from saying out loud what you want to keep a secret? Are you going to have me murdered? You've failed several times already. I suggest, you reconsider your problem solving strategy."

Loghain, his jaws firmly set, has his fists clenched at his sides. For a short moment it seems as if he's going to lunge himself at Rori to throttle her. That very moment, she's as cool as a dog's snout. It's the female knight, however, who jumps forward, enraged by Rori's effrontery.

"How dare you talk to the Hero of the River Dane like that?" the dark haired woman spits in her face. Barkley at once is at Rori's side, growling at the knight.

Rori meanwhile doesn't even bother with acknowledging the woman said anything at all. She couldn't be there and it wouldn't make much of a difference. I've seen nobles act like that, mostly when dealing with elves, but never Rori. Now it suits her agenda, she is capable of going all out.

"Ser Cauthrien," Loghain says as calmly as one can say anything through gritted teeth. The woman immediately obeys and stands behind her master once more. That's when Rori tells Barkley to sit and the dog takes his place behind her, perfectly mirroring the knight's behaviour.

"There's talk that your illness left you feeble, Eamon," Loghain chooses to change the topic.

Ha! I dare say, that means Rori scores.

"Some worry that you may not longer be fit to advise Ferelden," Loghain goes on, pacing until he comes to stand next to Eamon. Another attempt of appearing intimidating. Unfortunately for Loghain it doesn't work any better with the arl than it did with Rori. The only person appearing quite intimidated at the very moment is Howe. Angus scowls at him in a way that should be considered psychological warfare, having the Arl of Amarethine sweat like the swine he is.
"Illness?" Eamon snorts, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Why not call your poison by its true name? Not everyone at the Landsmeet will cast aside their loyalties as easily as you in these sick events."

"How long you've been gone from court, Eamon," Loghain goes on, not even reacting at the accusation. "Don't you recognize Rendon Howe, Arl of Amarenthine and Teyrn of Highever?"

"And current Arl of Denerim after Urien's unfortunate fate at Ostagar," Howe smirks. "Truly, it is an embarrassment to riches."

"Highever rightfully belongs to the Couslands," Rori begins, losing some of her nonchalance now she has to address Howe personally. Behind her Angus is gritting his teeth so hard, one can hear them crunch.

"You have no rights," Howe cuts her short. "Your family surrendered them when I revealed them to be traitors to the king."

"My father and my mother were both heroes, faithful and loyal to their king," Rori snaps, at the same time holding out her arm to stop her uncle from charging Howe. "The traitor is you, Howe. You got it all nicely planned and it almost worked out. Almost. The Couslands are not yet defeated and I will not just stand there and watch you defile the honour of my family. I will recover what has been stolen from my family, Howe. And I will make you face justice. It won't be pretty."

"You are either very bold or very stupid to threaten the teyrn before witnesses," Ser Cauthrien speaks up once more.

"Neither is he a teyrn nor do I threaten him," Rori replies with the sweetest smile. "I am making a promise. And I have the intention to keep it."

"You recall what her mother did with the Orlesian enemies she captured to make them talk, don't you, Howe?" Angus coos softly and the Arl of Amarenthine doesn't look as cocksure anymore as a few moments ago. "In case she doesn't get you, you thrice-cursed whorespawn, then the Mac Eanraigs will." Ser Cauthrien opens her mouth again but Angus is faster. "Loghain, please, explain to your boot licker what a blood feud is. It's a good old Fereldan tradition after all. We will wipe out the name Howe and if it's the last thing we do."

"Enough Cauthrien!" Loghain stops the knight from any further action or remark. "This is not the time or place. I had hope to talk you down from this rash course, Eamon. Our people are frightened. Our king is dead. Our land is under siege. We must be united now if we are to endure this crisis."

"If not for you tearing the nation apart with your actions, we wouldn't be standing here now," Rori points out, but Loghain chooses to ignore her, marking her as insignificant.

"Your own sister, Queen Rowan, fought tirelessly to see Ferelden restored," he addresses solely Eamon now. "But you see her work destroyed. You divide our nation and weaken our efforts against the Blight. You're selfish ambitious to the throne."

Rori just rolls her eyes, reluctantly waving Shale off when the golem asks if it's time to crush some heads.

"I cannot forgive what you've done, Loghain. Perhaps the Maker can. But not I," Eamon says, sounding more sad than angered. How he can stay calm, is beyond me. Rori for sure isn't calm anymore. She's just too busy keeping her uncle from breaking Howe's neck to give it a try herself. All this toing and froing and I haven't been acknowledged once. That's just fine for me. Stay out of
the line of fire while I try to figure out how I feel, now that I am face to face with the man who is
responsible for Duncan's and my brothers' - one by blood, several in arms - deaths. There's anger
inside of me, but more consternation at how stuck up this man is in his own beliefs. It's as if he is
living in his own little Loghain-World and there's nothing we can say or do to change his mind. It
leaves me speechless to see so much fanatism at work, such an overestimation of his capabilities.

"Our people deserve a king of the Theirin bloodline," Eamon insists. "Alistair will be the one to lead
us to victory in this Blight."

"Oh, is that all I have to do? No pressure." And they all lived happily ever after. Really, it's going to
be a stroll in the park. Just end the Blight, slay the archdemon. Nothing big. Slaying darkspawn is
my most favourite pastime anyway.

"So that is him? The royal bastard?" Loghain scrutinizes me. Oh, now it's my turn to be intimidated?

"Well, you're admitting the royal part, that's a start," I murmur.

"The emperor of Orlais also thought I could not bring him down," Loghain snarls in my face.
"Expect no more mercy than I showed him. There is nothing that I would not do for my homeland."


"There's something you forget, though, Loghain," Rori calls after him when Loghain just turns to
march off. "We are no wimpy Orlesians. We are Fereldans, body, heart and soul. This is our
homeland as much as yours. And we will defend it with our lives."

Loghain doesn't turn back at this challenge and stops Ser Cauthrien from getting herself involved in
yet another catfight. He strides towards the door that is being held open for him by a cheerfully
grinning elf.

"Teyrn Loghain, right? Or is it king now? Regent? You know who I am, yes?" Zevran pleasantly
asks, having Loghain stop in his path. He frowns, clearly annoyed that an elf would dare to address
him in such a respectless manner - or address him at all.

"You don't seem familiar...," Loghain says coolly, trying to get past the obnoxious elf who keeps
standing in the way.

"Well, let me help you remember," Zevran offers. "I was one of the Crows you hired to kill the Grey
Wardens."

"How dare you...," Ser Cauthrien barks, jumping forward to shove Zevran aside. The elf is too fast
for her, pirouetting past her and getting into Loghain's back so quickly that Cauthrien stumbles over
her own feet in a panicked attempt to protect her master.

Zevran holds up his hands in defense, showing he is unarmed and means no harm. "I just wanted to
report that I failed my mission," he explains. Then he sighs heavily, puts both hands over his heart
and pulls a face of utter distress. "I'm terribly broken up over it."

Thus said he wraps one arm around Rori's shoulder and smacks a kiss to her cheek, the other around
my waist - he's luckily too short for kissing me - and grins brazenly.

That look on Loghain's and Howe's faces... priceless!
"Isn't the mattress soft enough, your Highness?" Rori teases when she comes to my room after a brief
discussion of the rather unpleasant situation in Eamon's study. Part of this discussion was Eamon
beseeching Rori and me to keep it low. So she actually has her own room. Seems, though, she has
no intention to use it. I'm certainly not going to complain. Sure, she catches me jumping around on
my bed like a little boy to test the mattress...

The arl used to come here in the winter when I was small. I, uh... slept with the hounds. And now
servants show me to my own room with my own bed... It's not Rori's name that the servants react to,
like last time when we were in Denerim and just showed up at the front door... No, this is about me.
Many here still know me as the little boy who spent his nights in the kennels... now they call me
Your Highness and Prince Alistair ...it feels so... unreal.

"Something was poking me indeed," I grin foolishly.

The bitter anger and deep felt sadness, she has been caught in ever since meeting Howe and
Loghain, have vanished from Rori's expression at the sight of my sportive activities. Now she smiles
- although it's a rather small and crooked smile.

"Perhaps a pea, my prince?" Rori kicks off her boots to join me hopping around on the huge four-
poster bed. "Peas can be rather sneaky."

"Most likely," I sigh, deeply devastated by the cruelty of the world in general and peas in particular.
"I am just not made for the harshness of life."

We fool around a bit and find out, even Rori, peewee that she is, can jump high enough to hit the
canopy with her head. And with her feet, too, when doing a sumersault. We also recover our ability
to laugh ourselves to tears rather quickly when Rori, finding herself disarmed in our epic pillow fight,
retrieves the first thing she can grab from her backpack and finds herself pointing the flogger at me.

"Unfair!" That's what I get for challenging a rogue... I need a rearmament... and quickly grab the first
thing I can get hold off...

Pillow in one hand, golem control rod in the other, I'm ready to fend her off. My weapon of choice
proves rather effective. The mere sight of me wielding the rod causes Rori to collapse in a gigglefit. I
don't wait for her to recover but take advantage of her weakened condition, wrestle Zevran's dirty toy
from her, pin her to the mattress and crush my lips against hers...

Then everything kinda happens real fast... and what can I say? A four-poster bed, these decorative
braided cords dangling from the canopy, one squealing and giggling and by now stark naked girl, it's
just too tempting... and that sight of Rori tied to that bed and completely at my mercy... hmmm... and
then there's Zevran's fly flap...

I have no clue how to use it and I do not want to hurt Rori. This thing didn't come with a manual,
you know... So I guess, we have to find out for ourselves... The only other option was to ask the
deviant elf... and... uhm... I'd rather not... I already get flustered thinking about it.

So it's fooling around a bit for now, teasing her, letting her feel the softness of the leather but not its
bite... Maker's breath, she's so beautiful, sprawled across the mattress with her wrists shackled to the
bed, shuddering whenever the leather touches her. I move the leather strands across her breasts and
belly, teasingly slap them against her womanhood.
Turning her around, Rori lies prone with her wrists still tied. I run the flogger down her spine, bringing my palm down on her buttocks at the same time. My fingers slip between her legs, stroking her, while I whip her across her back a few times, carefully first, then with more strength behind each blow until I have her squirming and moaning in pleasure. She has turned her head to look at me over her shoulder, her face - like mine - all flushed and her eyes half closed.

When I look sideways, I can see our reflection in the mirror above the dressing table... I definitely have a thing for mirrors these days... I sporting a rather prominent erection, kneeling between Rori's legs, swinging the whip... Rori rolling her head from side to side, bucking her hips and arching her back at my ministration... Yep, mirrors are just awesome that way.

I tease her until she's close before entering her and making love to her from behind. She moans and gasps my name, making those cute mewing noises that sound like music to me. It's a roaring climax - for both of us...

Collapsing on top of Rori, all sweaty and spent, breathing ragged and a foolish grin plastered across my face, I tenderly kiss the back of her neck and inhale the verbena scent of her hair.

Maker! Life is beautiful!

And I have every intention to make it even more beautiful tonight... with even more steaming hot, mindnumbing sex...

When I flip Rori around to lie on her back again, she has dozed off. That woman is so tired lately, she can sleep anywhere and anytime... apparently.

Chuckling, I kiss her brow and her eyes, nuzzle her nose, bite her bottom lip, roam my hands across her body, whisper dirty talk into her ear - and feel extremely stupid and embarrassed while doing so... and it's probably not that dirty at all... and not that sexy because I begin to stutter in between and laugh foolishly... and all I get as a reply is Rori starting to snore softly.

Charming.

"You know how to make a man feel wanted, kitten," I chuckle as I untie her and wrap her in my arms, snuggling as close to her as possible.

The next morning I wake to my beloved fellow Warden fumbling her naked breasts...

Oh happy day!

She cups them, weighs them in her hands, squeezes them testingly and frowns in confusion.

Okay, maybe not that happy...

"They are so... big!" Rori greets me.

"Oh, yes, they are!" I agree, grinning stupidly at her truly magnificent bosom.

She swats at me. "That's not what I mean... they are... do you think they are bigger? Than yesterday, I mean."

"Uhm..." What kind of question is this? It sounds like one of those, Zevran warned me about. Questions women ask that you cannot give a right answer to. No matter what you say, it's wrong and she's going to be mad at you... Doom! "What makes you think so?" I grin nervously.
Rori is completely oblivious to my uneasiness. "They are so... heavy," she mutters, frowning some more as she stares down on her perfectly round and pale bosom with those beautiful pink nipples that remind me of little rosebuds. "Awfully heavy. And tight. And somewhat... hard. Can boobs grow over night?"

"Err... you are talking to Ser Never-licked-a-lamppost-in-winter-before-a-certain-redhead-came-along, remember?"

"Here, do you feel it?" She takes my hands and places them on her bosom. Oh Maker! I certainly do feel something hard and tight, but it's got nothing to do with her concerns. Only when she clears her throat, I get that she's been looking at me questioningly, while I just squeezed her breasts, grinning stupidly.

"Err... maybe a bit bigger? Everything else feels like it usually does..." That's when I brush my fingertips across her nipples. It's a caress as soft as a feather and still it has her moan out loud and shudder in reply. When I repeat it, she gasps and catches both my hands. "Does it hurt?"

"No..., it's just so... intense..."

"Uhm... what about that?" I circle my tongue around her nipple.

"Maker!" Rori breathes. She almost jumps right out of her skin.

Okay, that's new. Usually Rori likes it a bit rough. She doesn't mind being bitten or having me suck hard at her nipples, quite the contrary.

"Could it be yet another physical Grey Warden change?" Rori wonders.

"How should I know?" I mumble, hardly listening as I am still caressing her breasts.

"Duncan never mentioned anything like that?"

"Duncan? To me? About female breasts?" The mere thought has me blushing a deeper shade of crimson. It's not that the Grey Wardens never talked about...uhm... bosoms. Actually some of them talked about nothing much else, even compared to Zevran... but none ever said something like... that...

"Okay, forget that I asked." Silence. I look into her eyes, she looks into mine. Then she bites her lips oh so beautifully and I smile my lopsided foolish smile.

"Want me to find out if anything else changed?" I ask hopefully in a rather husky voice.

"A thorough examination?" Rori mutters against my lips.

From that point on one thing leads to another and soon I have my face buried between her legs, sucking at that little pebble there. Okay... I had to shackle Rori to the bed again because she was all like "I have to take a bath first!"... So I had to wrestle her down to stop her from climbing out of bed and leaving me waiting for ages... and now she tries very unsuccessfully to scowl at me and calls me a jerk repeatedly... which sounds quite cute when she fails to suppress her moans during her rant.

"Okay, wait here," I tell her when I have her all excited and tense. Not that she can go anywhere the way I've tied her up.

"W-wait?" Rori breathes. "Wh-what?... Hey! Where are you going? Alistair?" That look on her face... priceless! I can't help a smug grin as I deliberately slowly pour myself a glass of water and
sip it even more slowly. Rori glowers at me. "Alistair," she says in a way that usually would have me run for cover as it implies she's going to throw something at me.

I almost choke on my drink. "Whoa! Keep cool! You use that look and that voice on the archdemon and it will run for the hills," I laugh, grab the golem control rod and hurry to climb back into bed.

"Alistair, what do you want with this?" Rori asks icily.

"What did you keep it for all the time?"

That question has her all flustered and squirming. Even her ears glow as she grins at me sheepishly, switching from furious to adorable within a heartbeat. "Err... uhm... nothing?" she squeaks, blushing down to her navel. "Ohhh... okay... fine... yes, I kept it because... but... but... I don't know..."

"You never thought about giving it a try?"

"Several times but..."

"Yes?"

"Then I began to wonder... uhm... you know, since it's Shale's... would she know?"

Errr... Huh? I look at that rod with different eyes now. Would the golem... feel... anything? That thought is... no, no, I don't even want to think about it! Maybe using that rod is not that good an idea after all...

"And actually... I really don't want anything inside of me but you," Rori adds timidly, looking at me with huge, round eyes.

I toss the rod aside immediately and unshackle her. "Kink gets overrated anyway."

Mind you, without a certain elven assassin who just can't keep his mouth shut and has to inform everybody and their dog about his amorous adventures, I would believe kink to be a special brew of dwarven ale.

"Three cheers for good old vanilla sex!" Rori giggles and lunges herself at me.

Without said elf she would believe vanilla sex to be an exotic Orlesian dessert.

"Three cheers?" I groan, finding myself pinned beneath my beloved fellow Warden. "All before breakfast? You didn't even have coffee yet!"

"Now you mention it... coffee tastes strange lately..." Rori ponders as she slowly begins to ride me. "I'm not sure I like it anymore."

"No coffee?" I moan. "You really should talk to Wynne, kitten. You have to be seriously ill."

So we cheer once before breakfast. Then Rori calls for the servants and we have breakfast in bed together instead of in the dining room with Eamon, Angus and our companions.

"Isn't that... rude?" I ask when several trays loaded with food arrive.

"You're going to be king," Rori reminds me, mug of fennel tea in hands. I can't believe she's really drinking that. It's gross. It's unnatural. It is so not Rori. "Kings have certain privileges." One of these privileges obviously includes being fed with cheese by a beautiful ginger while still lying in bed stark naked.
"Ugh, yeah, the king business." I pull a face.

"Still unhappy about it?"

"Unhappy?" I frown, trying to make sense of myself. That's nothing that comes easily. I hardly ever make sense to myself or anybody else. "I don't know. Scared, yes. But ever since we met Loghain, after what he said, how he acted... we have to stop this man! And if Anora is on his side, then there's probably really nobody but me... and this is even scarier... but... I have never turned away from battle like a coward... and that's why I cannot walk away from my responsibility as a claimant of the throne."

"But what do you really want?" Rori sitting cross-legged on the bed, wearing no more than my shirt, her red curls a tousled mess, looks so adorable, it's real hard to not just beam at her foolishly but to actually have a conversation. Especially when it's one about the king-thing.

"Next to a liftetime supply of cheese?" I grin, but this time it just won't work. The time of hiding soon will be over. Decisions will be made and it's unlikely they will only be my own. To buy myself some time, I absentmindedly sip some tea - and find it's Rori's - bah! "It's not that easy, Rori."

"Regard it as a hypothetical question."

Okay, cards on the table, Alistair... "I think... I'd rather not become king. I'm not prepared for all this," I murmur, talking more to myself than to her. I do not expect her to understand how I feel. How could she? We are worlds apart here.

Having my own room, room service included, that's already freaking me out. I've never been part of this world, not like Rori. She's not aloof or something like that. But when she's amongst nobles, she just blends in... The way she talks changes... as long as she cares to pay attention to it and is not fuming angry... and she just is used to that kind of life... like she left her boots to be cleaned in front of the door last night. Or she just asks a bath to be prepared, having the servants run and heat the water for her. I was always told, never to expect this for myself - and I was quite okay with it.

And me focussing on such things like a hot bath and room service... yes, I am avoiding what really bothers me...

The ruling business. Governance. Politics. All the huge decisions to be made. A kingdom depending on me.

Merciful Andraste!

"Becoming a Grey Warden, I finally felt like belonging somewhere," I admit. "All this... it's so not me. I do not belong here. So... yes, I would rather stay a Grey Warden... with you, happy ever after."

I'm not sure how she's going to react. All this time when Leliana and Rori pushed my campaign, I got the impression Rori wants this for me. She keeps saying, I would be a good king - wherever she gets that idea from is totally beyond me. She has to be disappointed about my lack of ambition, right?

"Too bad Anora seems to support her father in his madness," Rori mumbles thoughtfully in between devouring her third sweet bun with strawberry jam. Her mouth is all smeared and sticky.

"You cannot stand her." I point out.

Rori pokes my side with her teaspoon. "And you reminded me, that my personal feelings shouldn't influence my judgement of her leadership."
"I said something reasonable and wise?"

"You have your moments."

"Wow! And I didn't rub it in on Morrigan... blast!"

"All those missed chances!"

"There aren't that many." I laugh, then inhale deeply to prepare myself for my next question. Do I even want to know? "What do you want?"

"I want you," Rori answers without hesitation.

Ahhh... oookay... Don't get me wrong, it's... cute... but, I don't know... also somewhat... scary. How could I be enough for a woman like her? What if she one day sees me like I really am and not through her rose-coloured glasses? Okay, I am having some kind of kingly panic attack... Maker, she'd so kick my ass if she could read my mind right now...

"Ahh, but would you prefer the Grey Warden Alistair or King Alistair?"

Rori shrugs as if she really didn't care at all. "I'm not that picky. Any Alistair is just fine for me."

"Shouldn't a noble lady be more ambitious about her future?" I want to sound teasing... but fail miserably.

"Alistair, you will still be yourself with or without a crown," Rori says softly, taking my hand in hers. It's amazing how hands so small and fragile can belong to a person so strong willed and determined. "I don't love you for being Maric's son. I fell for you because you are adorably cute..."

I scowl at her.

"... and ruggedly handsome," Rori laughs and I swat at her hands when she tries to pinch my cheeks. "Those chiseled features, the beautiful hazel eyes, that finely sculptured body..."

"Don't forget my pretty hair!"

"How could I?" She ruffles it. Lucky her, it's already a complete just-out-of-bed-mess or I'd have to seek revenge by tickling her mercilessly. Nobody messes up my hair and gets away with it! "And the prominent nose!"

"What is it about my nose that has everybody comment on it?" I mutter, squeezing it testingly. Zevran keeps saying 'The size of a man's nose tells a lot about his hose.' And then he grins at me and stares pointedly at my nose and my pants in a way that makes me blush and start to stammer and sweat. And I don't even own a hose!

"It's a very sexy nose." Rori kisses the tip of it. "And of course the whole rest of you is also strong and manly and oh so sexy..."

"Now you're making fun of me."

"Fun of you? Perish that thought, dear prince... but since we're already talking about fun... You're funny...," she cheers and claps her hands like when Barkley performs a trick.


"In a good way, you fool!" She swats at me. "You make me laugh, and that's what I love you for the
most." Her giddiness fades to make room for more seriousness. It's a side of herself she seldomly allows to surface. Like for all the rest of us, fooling around and making incongruous jokes has become a way for her to deal with all the horrors we have seen and endured. "You were the first to make me laugh again after my family got murdered. Whenever I feel like giving up, you give me strength. You are the meaning of my life when there's nothing much more for me to expect but death."

Oh... so it's that serious now. Rori hardly ever talks about death. She simply refuses to acknowledge the mere possibility of dying as if her stubbornness could convince death to spare her.

"You help me endure all this... and... if there's a future for us... then I couldn't care less if you stayed a Grey Warden or became king. All I care for is Alistair," Rori whispers as she presses my hand to her bosom right above her heart, covering mine with her hands. Maker's Breath! Her dark blue eyes are so wide and full of love and fear. She's as scared as I am, but we are both trapped and there's no other way out but charging forward. "Now is the time when you are supposed to deliver one of your witty one-liners," Rori mumbles as I lean in to kiss her - and end up having us both cheer for the second time. This is becoming the extended version of a breakfast in bed...

Sometime later I lie in bed with Rori in my arms and for a brief moment I am completely and utterly happy... and then it's gone when a servant informs us of an urgent meeting in Eamon's study.

Seems two cheers have to be enough for this morning...

We jump out of bed real quick, give ourselves a lick and a promise... duh... err... that's not meant how it sounds... we of course do not lick each other... not now... uhm... how about we forget I said anything at all?

"You do realize, that they could force us apart, should I become king?" I ask while crawling around on all fours to fish my left boot out from under the bed. I so know Rori is dreamily watching my hindquarters that very moment.

"Nobody can force us apart, Alistair," Rori says matter-of-factly. "As long as you want to be with me and I want to be with you, we do stay together." Defiance is written all across her face. "Anyway, before you can become king, we have to survive Loghain's schemes. He won't stop now, not after he failed in persuading Eamon to side with him."

I snort. "After the crimes he and this bastard Howe committed, he couldn't truly believe, we would pat his shoulder and be all like: Hey, Loghain, old chap, no hard feelings!"

"Loghain is ruthless," Rori says, handing my shirt back to me. "A man like him has to have some skeletons in his closet"

"It has to be a large closet. Especially with a bastard like Howe at his side."

"Kings have immensely big closets," Rori giggles. Her amusement doesn't last. It is replaced by a worried expression and a frown that has her even wrinkle her nose. "Howe," she mutters, making the name sound as if she was talking about something foul and rotten. "Howe is no more than a tool, easily corrupted by power and riches. Once he isn't useful anymore, Loghain will find a way to get rid of him."

"What makes you think so? Loghain seems to trust him. Howe is his strongest and most loyal ally at the moment." We finally made it out of our room and hurry down the corridor towards Eamon's study.
"In the Landsmeet Howe's crimes and his connection to Loghain will be discussed," Rori points out. "My parents were respected, they had power and influence, they were heroes. It will prove hard for Loghain to convince the nobility they were traitors without any evidence. I doubt, it was all Howe's idea. Loghain is the head behind the murder of my family." She knocks at the door, pushing it open at Eamon's invitation to enter. "And Loghain cannot risk that Howe spills all their dirty secrets in front of the Landsmeet to safe himself should the wind change." On entering, Rori looks much like a dark rain cloud herself when she adds: "There's a storm brewing and I wouldn't be surprised if we found ourselves right in its eye at this very moment."
“Do you believe anything Anora’s handsmaiden said?” I ask on leaving Arl Eamon's estate through the service door. There's going to be no parade today. Not when the Sneaky Squad and I are on a secret mission to rescue Queen Anora. Eamon didn't want to let me go because of me being the last of the Theirins, but I insisted - which caused Sten once more to remark on the spine I actually have. Uncle Angus seemed pleased, too. He said something like: "A bastard can be king, a dastard can't."

"Unfortunately we can't sit back and wait to find out," Leliana says far too cheerfully. "Oh, this is a grand move! It's outstanding in its brilliancy. Loghain may despise the Orlesians but in his very own way, he knows how to play the Game. I am impressed."

I am not impressed. Not at all. But I do want to believe what Erlina said is true. That Anora loved Cailan, that she and her father aren't partners in crime but that she is innocent. And that Howe keeps her captive to use her against Eamon - and me - dead or alive. I want her to be the good queen. I need her to be the good queen.

Her claim isn't as strong as mine being a Theirin - at least that's what Eamon keeps telling me - but she has one key advantage: She knows how to do the job and for five years she has been doing it damn well.

And one rather should let someone rule a kingdom who knows what she's doing, than putting a clueless fool in charge just because his father happened to be king, right? Just my humble opinion. Unfortunately nobody ever cares to ask for it.

"I think, it's a trap. And a real nasty one," Rori mutters gloomily. With a yawn she adds: "It doesn't matter if Erlina's story is true, though, either way, we're completely fucked."

"Oh, that you are indeed," Zevran laughs and winks, dodging easily when Rori swats at him. "Ah, my lovely Fereldan rose, I can hardly blame you. Alistair is such a ruggedly handsome specimen..."

"Oh, go on like this and I'm going to be sick here and now," Morrigan snorts, pulling a face.

"I am already sick. Sick and tired of you going on and on about how stupid I am. Even I, dork that I am, have gotten it by now. Just put a sock in it!" I snap back.

"Mentioning socks," Morrigan goes on as if I hadn't said anything at all. "That mangy dog already stinks awfully." Barkley whines and barks. Cocking his head to one side, he stares at Morrigan's calves as if he was trying to make up his mind about snapping at them. "Tis beyond me, though, how you manage to endure the stench that comes from Alistair's feet..."
"Rori with her cute little nose isn't bothered as much by smells as you are with that beak sticking out from the middle of your face..."

Hissing like a venomous viper, Morrigan points her staff at me. I can sense the surge of magic and instinctively channel my templar powers.

"Enough Alistair vs. Morrigan-bashing," Rori interrupts us sharply, sounding almost like Wynne when the mage scolds us like students in her classroom. Both mine and Morrigan's energy dies down immediately. The witch crosses her arms in front of her chest and lifts her chin, looking defiant. I stand there all flustered and grin foolishly. Rori sighs deeply and shakes her head - just like Wynne would do. We all really do spend too much time together. "Am I the only one who thinks this street is strangely empty?" my beloved fellow Warden asks now she has our attention. Barkley next to her is growling lowly.

It's an alley away from the main roads, stores and workshops. Still, usually doors and windows should be open on such a sunny day. There should be children playing in the streets, their mothers sitting on benches in front of the houses where they chat with the neighbours while they mend clothes, feed their babies or peel potatoes for lunch... Maker, there should be refugees! They are practically everywhere, camping in any street. There should be old men sitting together with their cups of tea, complaining that they'd rather have a pint or two, commenting about the weather, the harvest and politics...

There's no bustling city life, however. Instead there's not a single person on the street, the doors are closed, the windows blocked up. The only living thing is a tabby cat that looks down on us from the top of a wall and begins to lick its bottom clean with ostentatious ennui when Barkley barks at it.

"Ahhh, an ambush!" Zevran exults, clapping his hands together giddily. "Quite obvious, don't you think? So the only question is: who is trying to kill us this time? Any bets?"

The Antivan elf isn't as giddy anymore when we walk into the trap a minute later. Not that it is much of a trap anymore when you know it is there. We briefly discussed avoiding it, but Rori clearly voted for getting things cleared now, when we already know we're in for trouble.

"And so here is the mighty Grey Warden at long last," the dark haired man at the top of the stairs sneers down at Rori. I have to admit, I feel a little huffed that he only talks about one mighty Grey Warden. The contract was about two recruits after all. It hurts my manly feelings that the assassins don't even believe me that much of a threat to acknowledge I exist.

"Tis most peculiar that one makes the effort of creating an ambush and then giving his advantage away by entering a conversation," Morrigan mutters and rolls her eyes.

"From the stories I've heard, I didn't expect to meet a little girl," the dark stranger goes on, smirking down at Rori.

"Perhaps you shouldn't judge people by their looks," Rori advises politely. "I assume, you haven't come here for some nice conversation. So, who are you and what is it, you want?" Of course she knows where this will lead to. And who that man is. She cannot have missed Zevran's surprised gasp. She's buying time for the Sneaky Squad to locate any hidden opponents, for Morrigan to prepare her spells and for Leliana to pick her first target. With a bit of luck the two of them can bring down four men before they even get close to Rori, Zevran and me in close range combat... If the elf is going to fight with us. I'm not that sure about it and position myself between him and Rori. Of course he notices. I'm just not sneaky enough. But I cannot take his hurt feelings into consideration right now. Sorry pal.
"The Crows send their greetings once again." The dark haired man bows and blows a kiss at Rori. She rolls her eyes and groans in reply.

"I do hope, you don't expect an affectionate reception," Rori retorts, arms crossed in front of her chest.

"Too bad, we didn't bring along Shale. She so loves to smash filthy birds," I sigh.

"Don't tell her we got to kill birds without her, she'll be sulking for two weeks," Rori giggles.

The Crow appears a little huffed about our lack of fear and respect - he looks rather sour for sure. Sorry, dude, you just cannot compete with darkspawn in general, broodmothers in particular, werewolves and abominations, demons and such. Maybe if he had brought a stallion sized pet spider - that would have made Rori's knees wobbly.

"So they sent you, Taliesen, or did you volunteer for the job." Zevran finally steps forward. Rori groans at the mentioning of the Crow's name.

"What?" I mouth at her.

"Best friends," she mouthes back.

"Blast it!" I mutter. Now this is a tough one. I don't want to walk in Zevran's shoes right now.

"I volunteered of course. When I heard that the great Zevran had gone rogue, I simply had to see it for myself," Taliesen smuggly comments. Both he and Zevran are for sure masters of not letting any of their true emotions shine through. If I was forced to fight against... uhm... now, it really sucks when you realize that you don't have any childhood friends... I just never fitted into the Chantry, in no way... there was this elven girl, the daughter of one of the maids at Eamon's Denerim estate... but this was even before I was sent away and I have never seen her again... and I've never felt accepted and at home until I met... Duncan... yes, what would I do if I had to decide whether to side with Duncan or Rori... Oh merciful Andraste... now I want to give Zevran a hug.

"Is that so? Well, here I am in the flesh." Zevran grants his old buddy a broad smile and pirouettes once, bowing to his audience afterwards.

"You can return with me, Zevran. I know why you did this and I don't blame you. It's not too late," Taliesen beseeches the elf. My hand comes to rest on the hilt of my sword. I doubt, I'd be fast enough to counter an attack coming from the sneaky elf. But I can put myself in the way and buy Rori some time. Barkley joins me, making it look quite casual. The dog may indeed be smarter than I am. "Come back and we'll make up a story. Anyone can make a mistake."

"The mistake is right here. Alive and still kicking. I assume, part of your plan is to finally get your job done, right?" Rori sighs. "This is so tiresome," she adds with a yawn.

"I am not about to let that happen," Zevran assures her, not sounding as cocksure as he usually does. There's a sadness in his eyes and tone that makes Rori take his hand and squeeze it... and there she is again standing right next to the assassin when I have made such an effort to put myself in between them as a human wall. It certainly looks a bit stupid and is rather obvious... but I still squeeze myself in between them again, grinning foolishly at Zevran. He just shrugs and I feel awful at how sad he looks.

"What? You've gone soft," Taliesen snorts. "The Zevran I know wouldn't have let down such an opportunity."
"I'm sorry, my old friend, but the answer is no." Zevran sadly shakes his head. Did I mention I want to give him a hug? And at the same time shove him to stand ten feet away from Rori.... Perhaps I could disarm him while hugging him... More likely he'd disarm me and shackle me to a lamppost while tap-dancing to himself singing 'Somewhere over the rainbow' and juggling five raw eggs at the same time. "I'm not coming back and you should have stayed in Antiva."

"What? You've gone soft in the head. The Crows will make you pay for this, you fool." Taliesen sounds almost desperate by now.

"Perhaps they will at that, but I take what time I have," Zevran sighs. "You have a choice, Taliesen. All of you do."

"Traitor!" Taliesen hisses.

Okay, that much for choices and making them...

"I won't fight against you, Taliesen. We were friends once - and more..." The elf turns towards Rori and me. "I am... sorry."

"Zev," Rori whispers with tears glittering in her eyes as she hugs the elf. Maker, she's really making it impossible for me to protect her! He's a blasted assassin! What does she think she's doing? Does she think at all? "I cannot ask of you to get involved in this... to fight against your friend... We will manage. I am sorry that this has to happen..."

The assassin lifts her hand to his lips. "My beautiful Ferelden rose, you are certainly more than I ever deserved."

"You've always left too much thinking done to your cock, Zevran," Taliesen sneers. "I've told you more than once it will once be your downfall."

"Oh, here you are mistaken, Taliesen, my old friend. This young lady here warms another man's bed at night. And still..." Zevran shakes his head. He looks quite devastated. Then he turns to leave, calling out to his former friend: "Good luck, Taliesen. You will need it. I do not expect to see you again, not after this fight."

I'm not sure whether I feel betrayed. Somehow I understand Zevran is in a terrible situation - still I wish he would decide. If everything goes wrong, he could lose two friends in this fight. I think, he should decide... Now, isn't it ironic? I want him to make a decision when I hardly feel able to decide for myself. Not in this situation of course, but in general... Guess, I'm not the one to judge the elf... I still feel like punching him in the face...

"How pathetic," Taliesen shouts after the elf. "You once were great, Zevran. Now you're no more than a wretched creature." Then he points his sword at Rori. "When I'm done with you even your mother won't recognize you anymore."

"Don't bother. She's dead." Rori is already halfway up the stairs to meet the leader of the Crows. They have come under fire from Leliana and Morrigan before Taliesen even finished his sentence. "I want Taliesen alive!" Rori orders as she lunges herself at her target.

"Alive? What for?" the Crow sneers. "You have a thing for handsome assassins?"

"I'm more into almost templars and bastard princes," Rori retorts when doing a riposte. "But I have a friend who happens to like you."

My fighting moves aren't as pretty and elegant as hers. I'm not here to entertain anybody anyway. It's
the result that counts - and I can count pretty far. Taliesen and Rori dance with each other. It's a quite deadly dance and despite all the tricks she learnt from Zevran, Rori's losing ground.

This fight lasts much longer than I would have expected, though. And either Taliesen is far better than Zevran - or he's trying harder to cut Rori down. Or Rori is not at her best at the moment. Anyway, she soon has difficulties to fend him off and is forced to retreat down the stairs, giving him the advantage to attack her from above.

Rori does need help, but I'm stuck myself, trying to get rid of three attackers at once. Barkley tries to get to his mistress but is stopped by a kick in his side that sends the huge war hound flying. Morrigan's spell goes amiss when Taliesen lunges forward. His sudden charge catches Rori off guard and she stumbles over her own feet. Landing on her bottom, she drops her swords and only can roll aside with some luck when Taliesen comes after her. He laughs out loud in triumph when she scrambles to reach her dagger... I scream, Leliana fires a badly aimed arrow, Morrigan charges forward with her staff raised... too late...

Metal crunches against metal when Taliesen's blade comes down on Rori. Blocked inches away from her face, the dark haired Crow finds himself thrown backwards by the fierce counterattack of his former fellow assassin.

Zevran whirls his swords around as he comes to stand between Rori and Taliesen protectively.

"Didn't you say, you won't fight me?" the dark haired man growls, surprised by the elf's return.

"Alas, I changed my mind," Zevran says cheerfully. "I found, there's something... someone worth fighting for... so here I am. Prepare to die!"

"You've always been a loudmouth, Zevran. Too bad, you will fall silent forever today."

It's a fight like I have never seen one before. The opponents know each other well... too well. They know the others strengths and weaknesses and they mercilessly aim for the later. They move so fast, it's hard to follow and impossible to tell who gains the upper hand. Zevran has never been the best fighter I have ever seen, neither is Taliesen. They both fight unfair... Zevran throws sand into his opponents eyes when he finds himself kicked to the ground, Taliesen grabs the elf's pretty hair - that's what he gets for wearing it ridiculously long -, but with a quick move, Zevran frees himself and breaks the other man's wrist in doing so... In the end it's a matter of fitness. Taliesen grows tired faster than the elf and begins to make mistakes. Zevran lands a few well aimed blows... Taliesen stumbles forward and the elf runs him through without hesitation.

"Zev-zevran..." Taliesen stammers, then the light in is eyes expires and his dead body slides off the blade...

Zevran drops to his knees beside his dead friend. He reaches out to him and for a moment his hand hovers midair, then he straightens himself and gently closes Taliesen's dead eyes.

Blast it! This is bad. Real bad.

"One fool less," Morrigan remarks next to me. "So many left."

She is such a heartless bitch!

I glower at her but she chooses to ignore me and starts to examine her fingernails instead.

She's such a terrible, terrible... uhm... witch!
"Adios, mi amigo," the elf mutters as he gracefully raises to his feet. The moment he turns to us, Rori is there to hug him tight and Zevran hugs her back. Then it's Leliana's turn, then mine. I feel like a complete jerk. All the time I somehow expected Zevran to backstab us. I blamed him for turning his back on Rori... and now here he is, having killed his old friend from back in Antiva. I remember, he mentioned to Rori that he and Taliesen grew up together, were trained together. They were a team, almost like brothers...

"Zevran, I... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have doubted you... I behaved like... like an idiot..." I stammer.

"Alistair, my dear friend, you sought to protect the woman you love. You are a good man." The elf smiles sadly at me. "I... once loved a woman. I made the wrong decision then and have ever since regretted it. I should have listened to my heart then, but I thought it to be a weakness... I know better now."

Oh. Wow. That was... serious? And no lewd remarks, no sneering and smirking, no smugness... And there I thought I couldn't feel any more awkward and awful and mean... Boy, was I wrong!

"Zevran, I am so sorry. If there's anything I can do for you," I begin.

The elf suddenly beams at me. It's one of these typically Zevran-ish smirks and it's accompanied by him wiggling his eyebrows. "Oh, I wouldn't mind a quick pity bang."

"A what?" I squeak and blush a deeper shade of crimson when Leliana almost chokes on her laughter. Rori looks as confused as I do and shrugs. Morrigan just rolls her eyes and snorts.

"Ahh, Alistair, my clueless friend," Zevran chuckles and pats my back. "Ignorance is bliss, isn't it?"

"Err... I don't know? At least that's what they said at the Chantry," I mutter.

"Nevermind," Zevran slurs. "Isn't there a beautiful queen that awaits our help? Alas, the heroes rush to aid the damsel in distress."
Nemesis

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Notevensorry for pre-reading this TWICE and helping with the chapter, because I really had a hard time writing it.

We leave our stuff hidden behind some bushes outside Howe's estate. Yet another he has stolen from the rightful owners - although I have far less sympathy for that prick Vaughan Kendells than I have for Rori.

I'd like to say that Morrigan for once is decently covered but she refuses to put on the stolen uniforms, claiming they were filthy and smelly, and instead shapeshifts into a mabari bitch - much to Barkley's delight who immediately tries to sniff her butt - and to Morrigan's utter dismay. Just because she's a dog now, doesn't mean she's much into the canine way of saying hello to each other and the last place where she wants Barkley's snout, is her hindquarters.

Maker! I laugh so hard, I topple over and roll around on the ground. It's a good thing that the angry mob of craftsmen at Howe's front door makes such a ruckus or we'd laugh ourselves into deep shit trouble right now.

That dog has earnt himself a huge steak. He certainly deserves it.

"Stop that, you silly dog! Once she's a witch again, she'll neuter you with a wooden spoon!" Rori gasps in between her uncontrolable fits of laughter.

Her warhound practically freezes, tilts his head to one side as if he was considering his chances to puppy-dog-eye himself out of the mess he created, and then - proving once again that mabari are a specially intelligent breed - decides, he'd better not take the risk. Morrigan growls lowly at him, all fangs bared. Then she gets the extremely bright idea to turn into a black cat instead...

Barkley yelps excitedly and does what every good dog would do when encountering a feline. Morrigan hisses and scrambles up a wall, scowling down at the dog as he keeps barking frantically at her.

Oh merciful Andraste! I can't breathe anymore!

"I'm with stupid!" I snicker, pointing at the witch cat on the wall. This is the very best moment of my life. Ever. Okay, the very best Morrigan-moment. There's all those precious Rori-moments of course that finally make my life worth living. But when it comes to glee... then this is it! Ha! Hahaha!

"Okay, stop that... now. All of you! Barkley, sit! Alistair, you, too, stop barking at Morrigan!" Rori puts an end to the outbreak of complete silliness that has us laugh ourselves to tears. She can hardly speak with her gigglefits, nevertheless she tries with a stern face and tone. "Morrigan, maybe you want to reconsider the filthy, smelly uniform? No? Well, your choice. So, everybody ready? Can we go now?"

"Morrigan, you for sure know how to put the cat among the pigeons," Zevran snickers at the feline witch, safely tucked under Rori's arm by now. With that look on her furry face, she'd win any
"Well, she likes to believe, she's the cat's meow," I smirk as we sneak past the guards that Erlina has lured away from the door. Yeah, I am so going to rub it in! I hardly ever win when it comes to verbal duels with Morrigan. Actually like never. Ah, payback is a bitch... a witch-bitch... haha! "Seems she's not all the cat's pajamas, though."

"Now, let's see what Anora wants from us and how the cat jumps," Leliana adds, giggling girlishly.

As Erlina has it all planned out, it's no big deal to get into the estate. And still, once we're inside, I feel like... a mouse. Like a mouse that walked into one of these live catch traps for the cheese. And, you know, I really wouldn't be surprised if we found the cheese to be poisonous.

As soon as the door closes behind us and we're in, Rori turns on her heels and pulls me into a fierce kiss. I've had her kiss me like that before when we got into situations we were unlikely to survive. It's her way to say goodbye, just in case. She'd never say it out loud and she doesn't have to. It's all there in her kiss. Morrigan, still tucked under her arm, hisses and meows and struggles to get free.

"We'll go in, free Anora, and leave with her. We've been in worse situations. So no big deal," I whisper to my ginger assuringly as I run my thumb across her cheek tenderly. "This is the Sneaky Squad at work. Nobody will even know, we're here."

"From your lips to the Maker's ears," Rori mutters under her breath. She leans her head against my chest and I wrap my arms tighter around her. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

That's more than Morrigan can endure. She scratches me and bites Rori who drops the witch cat, cursing under her breath as she sucks at her thumb. "I'm pretty much tempted to kick you. You're lucky that you look so cute right now," Rori growls.

I don't care for cuteness. Not when it comes to Morrigan. She looks mean. Always. Even when she's a cat. So I deliberately step on her tail, acting as if I was just being clumsy. The cat shrieks and darts off into the crowded dining hall, where a maid loaded with a tray stumbles over her and sends tray, plates and food flying, showering some nearby guards with the whole mess...

"Awesome!" Zevran exclaims when the uproar starts. "Never could have caused a better distraction myself."

Nobody really takes notice of us when we pass through. They are too busy trying to catch the cat, shout obscenities at the miserable maid and such. It really isn't pretty. I almost choke on the effort to suppress my laughter at the sight of Morrigan scrambling away frantically. Meanwhile Erlina shows us the way to Anora. And that's where the whole mission becomes tricky. From this point on there's so nothing more to laugh about.

"Thank the Maker!" a female voice sounds through the closed door as soon as Erlina announces our presence. "I would greet you properly, but I'm afraid we had... a setback."

"Oh, don't bother. Proper greetings get overrated anyway. Nowadays I consider it a warm welcome when nobody tries to bash my head in at first sight," Rori replies as she examines the lock of the door that separates the queen from us.

"How do we know, she's really Queen Anora?" I whisper to my beloved fellow Grey Warden. "It could be some trick, couldn't it?"
"How am I supposed to answer that? Shall I try to shove my crown under the door? Do you think the royal family has a secret knock?" a rather unnerved voice snaps.

"Oh, now that would be cool, wouldn't it? Secret knocks and passwords...," I say giddily.

"Are you the one in charge? I pray to the Maker that the answer is no," the voice comments.

"I'm convinced. This is definitely Anora. And she's going to order us around within the next two sentences," Rori mutters gloomily. Then she adds without much enthusiasm while she already goes through her collection of lock picks to find the fitting one: "What setback?"

"My 'host' was not content with leaving me under heavy guard. He's sealed the door by magic."

Rori freezes midair, lock pick in hand. "Ah... okay... nice, someone feels like giving us that piece of information... before we trigger some nasty spell." She scowls at Erlina.

"I didn't know!" the elf cries. "I swear there were only guards here when I left. We must get her out of there!"

"Don't panic, Erlina!" Anora commands.

"Okay, so how do we open it? Anybody got any ideas?" Rori turns to the witch cat that has managed to escape the angry guards, but Morrigan only arches her back and hisses. "I take that as a no."

"Find the mage who cast the spell," Anora's voice sounds through the closed door. "He must likely be at Howe's side."

"So much for secrecy," Rori groans. "You are aware that the house is crammed with soldiers, aren't you?"

"Well, if Howe didn't know you were here, he soon will."

"You think?" Rori snorts, arms crossed in front of her chest. "That sounds like a trap to me..."

"Please do not leave my queen here!" Erlina beseeches us.

"Free me and I'll promise you my help in the Landsmeet."

Rori and I exchange a look. The ways she frowns, she's not convinced. Not that we have a choice. And even if we had, I wouldn't leave Anora here. "Alright! Alright! We'll go!" Rori finally snaps.

"Teyrn Howe..." Erlina begins.

"Howe is no teyrn!" Rori hisses, almost jumping into the poor elf's face. "He's a murderer and a traitor! He's scum and no title can change anything about that. And that's the nicest things I can possibly say about him!"

"You are wasting time, Lady Rori. Are you done now with your useless rant?" Anora asks unnervedly from behind the door.

"No, no, I am not done!" Rori snaps, bristling with anger. "I'm never done! Because whenever I think I am, there's someone around the next corner - or behind a magically closed door - who wants me to risk my life for them!"

Silence.
"Howe's probably in his room down the corridor," Anora finally prompts bossily.

"On my way! Maker!"

"Thank you! My prayers are with you," Anora calls after us.

"Prayers! An army would be something. Bloody blast it! If I had known, sneaky wouldn't do it, I'd have brought Shale, Sten and Oghren, too." And off Rori storms. Her faithful companions trudge behind. I feel a bit like walking on egg shells when Rori's temper is on display.

"Err... Rori? Are you okay?" I ask timidly.

"I really don't like this," Rori complains. "This is all so... rotten. I feel manipulated. Like I'm working for Loghain right now without really wanting it and not having a choice." Groaning, she leans her head against the wall of the corridor and inhales deeply to regain her composure. She looks as if she's about to be sick. "Remember what I said about Howe being a problem for Loghain?" she mutters when I hug her from behind and kiss her neck. Maker, she's tense! "We're solving it for him right now. Either we kill Howe or Howe kills us. It's a win-win-situation for Loghain and a lose-lose one for us."

"I dare say, that's a rather apt summary of the situation," Leliana agrees.

"Blast," I mutter. Did I mention I feel like a mouse in a trap? And there's not even cheese here... only Queen Anora, but I doubt she'd like to be compared to cheese. And I certainly like cheese better than her. And Rori. I do like Rori best, better than cheese and definitely better than Anora... Maker! I'm babbling complete nonesense. Don't listen to me. It's just my nerves being on edge...

My stomach rumbles noisily.

"How can you possibly be hungry now?" Leliana wonders.

"It's all that thinking about cheese, you know..."

"Cheese? Oh, nevermind! Forget I asked."

Some trouble later we find, Howe is not in his room. Sure! Why should anything ever be easy? So off we go, down the next flight of stairs - that leads us straight into the dungeons. Now, that wouldn't have been my first choice for locating my study and bedroom if this was my estate, but Howe seems to be quite fine with it.

"He's such a sick bastard," Rori murmurs under her breath as if she read my mind.

"Oh, you can have some interesting pastime in a dungeon, if that's the kind of entertainment you enjoy. Do a little roleplay with all the dom-sub stuff. There should be a whole lot of awesome equipment. Just don't forget your safe word," Zevran cheerfully exclaims. Rori and I exchange a look of utter confusion.

"Uhm..." Rori begins, ignoring me shaking my head no.

Before Rori can ask the elf yet another fatal question, we run into a guard - that gets his neck broken and dragged into the cell behind him by whoever is imprisoned there.

"Oh, wow, now, that trick could come in handy in case we ever find ourselves imprisoned somewhere," I mutter as we all take a step backwards - just in case something nasty is going to emerge from that cell.
"Alas, I'd take a less brutal approach," Zevran says. "Seduce them, steal their dagger when they less expect it... and hasta la vista, baby!"

"But what if the guard is a man?" I wonder, causing Morrigan to snort and Leliana to giggle. "What? It wouldn't work then, would it?"

The elf shrugs and grins broadly. "A man's got to do what a man's got to do."

Huh? Err... oh! OH! Uhm... I think, err... I'd rather stick with the neck-breaking.

"In case the guard's a man, you could also fake an illness. However, that usually only works when your host wants you alive and well," Leliana adds, still giggling.

"Best you don't get captured," Rori comments. The rather smelly man with the rather fuzzy dark beard emerging from the cell now, obviously didn't heed that advice.

"I thank you for creating such distraction, strangers," he greets us while he still tries to get the stolen uniform adjusted. "I've been waiting days for the opportunity. Do you think you could...?" He stops dead, staring at me as if he was seeing a ghost. "Alistair? Is that you?"

"Err...huh?... Last time I checked, yes, I'm me... Alistair... but who? Wait! I do know you! You were at my Joining!" Maker, I can't believe there's really another Grey Warden here! And one who has been part of the order for much longer - not as long as that shrivelled nutcase of a mage Avernus, but that makes it even better. Perhaps someone finally can answer all the questions Rori and I have. "He's one of us. A Warden from Orlais."

"Oh woot! A third Grey Warden! It's getting rather crowded," Rori cheers, clapping her hands. Barkley cocks his head to one side and announces his presence with a sharp bark. "Oh! Sorry, Barkley! How could I forget about you? Four Grey Wardens! It's getting better!" She peeps past the escaped prisoner into his cell, empty but for the dead guard. "You don't happen to hide some more in that cell? No? Good! Too many and the whole thing with the Blight would lose it's thrill."

"Did you have a bowl of sarcasm for breakfast?" I chuckle.

"With milk and sugar," Rori confirms.

The Grey Warden looks from Rori to me and back again - and he doesn't seem happy. Not at all. Well, Rori isn't happy either, but I blame that on the Howe-business. This man here isn't happy with us.

"Kids," the Warden mutters - and it sounds so... terribly sad. But the way he scrutinizes us right afterwards... it sends a cold shiver down my spine. Rori and I look at each other at the same time in confusion. So she has noticed it, too...

"I'm afraid I don't remember your name," I apologize to our brother in arms.

"No surprise there," Morrigan sneers. "Tis a mystery how he manages to remember his own name." I liked her so much better as a cat.

"I'm Riordan. Senior Warden of Jader, but born and bred in Highever and glad to be home."

"The lodging could have been better," I comment.

"Indeed. Howe captured me with an offer of hospitality and a poisoned chalice. I was fool enough to think, Loghain didn't yet know who I was."
"At least you live to regret your foolishness," Rori murmurs. "Others who trusted Howe weren't as lucky."

"Your accent betrays your background, young lady," Riordan observes. "You have to be Lady Rori Cousland of Highhever. I have heard of your family's fate. Allow me to express my deepest sympathy for your loss. Still, I am glad to find a sister from Highhever has joined our ranks."

"Howe will pay for this," Rori hisses. "So will Loghain."

"From the rumours flying through Denerim, removing him from the throne is already your plan, no?"

"Yep. And as soon as we got this done, we'll remove him from life," I add grimly.

"We have an awfully tight schedule," Rori sighs. "So, as nice as it is to stand around in some dark dungeons and have a little chat, we should get going before the guards come searching for us down here."

Rori returns the Grey Warden documents she found in Howe's room back to Riordan and since he cannot help us in any way at the moment, we agree to meet back at Arl Eamon's – in case we survive this madness – and then we're on our own again. No senior Warden guidance for the kiddos. Just good luck and farewell and off he hobbles.

The dungeon is gloomy with moist walls and it stinks of mold and blood and all the soft and liquid unmentionables that flesh creatures produce. Then there's the distant cries of pain and groans and whimpers, all mixed with the rattling of chains and occasionally the evil, nasty laughter of someone who indeed seems to have a rather good time down here.

Maker, I do hope Riordan makes it out alive! Although he should have far less trouble than Oswyn and Irminic. Hopefully they did as Rori told them and teamed up with Soris. I'm not that concerned about Vaughan, that prick! I'd have gladly left him in his cell. He's as bad as Howe - perhaps even worse. However, Leliana advises, his support could help us in the Landsmeet. Hmph. I still don't like it. "You can always get rid of him afterwards," Zevran adds gaily. "I happen to know of an unemployed Antivan assassin, you see..." I'm almost tempted.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, we stumble through the door we've been looking for and right into Howe and his bootlickers.

"Well, well, Bryce Cousland's little spitfire all grown up and still playing the man," Howe sneers as soon as he catches sight of Rori. He has quite a big mouth, considering we made it that far down into the dungeons of his estate, intruded it secretly – until I accidently walked in on a guard and a maid licking lampposts – well, she was licking his lamppost... Anyway, after that the Sneaky Squad turned into a Slaughter Squad with as much efficiency. And now we're here... I guess, Howe not being surprised at all is not a good sign, right?

"I never thought, you'd be fool enough to turn up here," Howe goes on. "And then, I'd never thought you'd live either."

"Glad to disappoint. Won't be the last time," Rori retorts. "And I still play a strong and independent woman. Rather successfully, if I may add so. " She's wary, agitated – and awfully uncomfortable as the armour she still wears for disguise sports Howe's family crest.

"Such as you will never find a man," Howe retorts snidely.

"Such as I just need a real man," Rori replies sweetly. Her imperturbability is a show. I've seen her before we walked in through that door and she was far from calm. She rather would have chosen the
moment of her revenge instead of being manipulated into playing Loghain's game. This way, she's but a pawn and bereft of her vengeance.

Howe's face burns red with anger and the sneer is wiped off his face. „I'll give you a real man before I cut your throat!“ he shouts, losing his composure for a moment.

„You got one hidden in one of your cells?“ Rori asks innocently. Behind her back, Zevran gives her thumbs up and Leliana beams with pride. Yeah, this is my woman! And she rocks!

Howe by now looks as if he was about to explode. „I thought Loghain made it clear that your pathetic family is gone and forgotten,“ he presses through gritted teeth.

„You have not forgotten. Even now when they are all dead, you find you're insignificant and insipid in comparison. It will haunt you forever... well, at least for the next few minutes which will be all that is left of 'forever' for you,“ Rori snaps, losing what frail composure she could manage.

„Your parents died on their knees. Your brother's corpse rots in Ostagar and his brat was burned on a scrapheap along with his Antivan whore of a wife,“ Howe spits.

Okay... I dare say, Rori has hit a nerve there. One look at her and I almost feel sorry for Howe. Nah, not really.

„And what's left? A fool husk of a daughter,“ Howe goes on, "likely to end her days under a rock in the Deep Roads. Even the Wardens are gone. You're the last of nothing. This is pointless. You've lost."

Rori's expression is feral with a deathly determination. She straightens, holding her head up high, and despite her being just a petite teenage girl, she has a grandeur that indeed makes Howe pale in comparison. „I know your game,“ she says in a voice so calm and cold, it sends shivers down my spine. The cute little redhead is gone. It's like Gingersnaps' returns and I so wouldn't be surprised if she shapeshifted into a monstrous werewolf that very moment. I almost wish she would just for the look on Howe's face. „No shadows. No lies. Just you and me."

Oh, wait! Whoa! Is she... is she challenging him for a duel?

Rori takes one step forward, seperating herself from her companions. She has locked her eyes with Howe's and it is him to look away as he begins to squirm.

„There it is, right there, the damn look in the eye that marked every Cousland's success that held me back,“ Howe exclaims. For the first time ever since we walked in, he's not sneering. Instead, he's impressed to the point where he begrudgingly has to show his opponent some respect. „It would appear that you've made something of yourself after all. Your father would be proud. I on the other hand want you dead more than ever."

Rori's expression softens for a moment when Howe speaks of her father. Damn yes, Bryce Cousland would have every reason to be proud of his daughter. I am proud of her. She doesn't play but is a strong and independent woman. And Howe is not man enough to fight her alone. It does not save him. Rori does not stand alone either and while her companions engage Howe's guards in a fight, she gets to duel him.

Mind you, Howe doesn't fight fair. But Rori doesn't either. And despite the resentment she has when it comes to Isabela, the pirate queen's duel lessons do come in handy now. Howe is taller, stronger and more experienced than Rori and that makes him underestimate her. He quickly has to find out, she's not as unexperienced as he remembers. She finds the weaknesses in his defense with deadly
accuracy. And she fights like a cat, toying with her prey. Rori clearly has no intention to make his death quick and fast. She's making him pay.

Pirouetting out of Howe's way, Rori quickly stabs him in the side from behind with her dagger, coming close enough to hiss into his ear: „That's how my father was wounded when you backstabbed him.“ With a twist of the blade, she pulls her knife free, causing Howe to stumble. With the next few blows, she brings him down to his knees. He's clutching his side as a puddle of blood forms around him.

Rori towers over him, the tip of her sword – formerly Duncan's – pointed at his throat. „Now you die on your knees. There's no greatness in you, Howe. And history will treat you just like the insignificance you are. You've lost.“

„Maker spit on you.“ Howe gurgles, as blood spatters from his mouth. „I deserved... more.“

„Blast yes, you did,“ Rori snaps, only reining herself in with some effort to not kick the dying man's head. „But I don't know how to work all those devices you got and we killed all your torturers...“

„That was a bit overhasty,“ Zevran agrees.

With a strangled sound, Howe falls back and dies. The moment he is dead, Rori slumps against the wall and slides to the ground. She's trembling as if she was freezing. "Hush, my love, it's over now," I whisper to her as I kneel beside her and hug her close.

"No, it's not," she says in a choked voice. "It has only just begun."
"We must go quickly and avoid notice," Anora, wearing a guard's uniform, announces - bossy as always - on leaving her prison. She immediately points the way and expects us to follow - unless of course there's trouble. Then she stays in the background and waits for us to clear it. "If Howe's people find me, I'll be killed. And my people will insist on escorting me back to the palace - where my father may also have me killed."

"The good thing about the Blight is how it brings people together, right?" Rori mutters under her breath, having me chuckle.

"Pardon?" Anora frowns at her and scowls at me. Yep, I'm a fool. Having been married to Cailan should have given her some practice in dealing with dorks, though, no? "I don't like to repeat myself..."

"Save your breath," Rori snaps. Her hair is a tousled mess, she's all over covered in blood, thankfully only partly her own, and her mood hasn't improved ever since we last talked to Anora. "Go quickly and avoid notice, I got it. Maker!" To me she murmurs: "What the fuck does she think, we were planning to do? Have a parade with Morrigan as a shapeshifted elephant and Leliana shouting the news from the top of the roof?"

I can't say that Rori's been less tense ever since Howe's death. Could be the enormous amount of guards we've been fighting to get back to Anora. We're all so damn lucky to be alive, it's actually a miracle. Or as Zevran puts it: "We are ridiculously awesome!"

"Rescuing you wasn't a stroll in the park, quite the contrary," Rori informs Anora as we hurry to finally get out of here. "We've been true to our word, I do hope you'll pay back the favour..." Her voice fades when we run into a rather grim looking Ser Cauthrien and her soldiers just around the next corner. They are clearly waiting for us.

Blast! That much for avoiding notice.

"Warden, in the name of the regent I am placing you under arrest for the murder of Rendon Howe and his men at arms," Ser Cauthrien declares. Like always she's the very image of self-righteousness. Even a mabari wouldn't be more loyal than her. Wonder if Loghain has her sleep in the kennels, too. "Surrender and you may be shown mercy."

"Mu-murder!?" Rori is gasping for air. She looks as if she was about to burst into tears or laughter or throttle Cauthrien. Or just everything at once. Disbelief, disappointment, fury... it's all plain visible on her face. "This... this is so UNFAIR!" she shouts and stomps her feet.

"As much mercy as Howe has shown the Couslands? Or as Loghain has shown Duncan and King Cailan?" I snort since Rori has not yet recovered from the accusation. "Anyway, we didn't come here
for Howe first place, we're here to free Anora, who was held captive."

"Don't be ridiculous! The queen isn't being held prisoner here or anywhere else. Her father would never stand for such a thing."

"But she's right here," Rori yells, pointing at Anora who has been hiding in the background without helping us.

"What!?" Cauthrien gasps, dumbfounded for once. That look on her face... priceless! I smirk at her. Ha! Now she's going to hear a truth she certainly won't like!

"Please, mylady, would you tell Ser Cauthrien what you told me so that we can get out of here without bloodshed?" Rori asks in the most polite way - well, as polite as someone can be who presses her words through gritted teeth. She's had about enough for today and I cannot blame her.

"Ser Cauthrien!" Anora calls as she comes forward. "Praise the Maker you're here! This brigand tried to kidnap me!"

"Wh-what!?" Rori for sure is as flabbergasted as I am. I'd never have expected the queen to backstab us like that. So this was a trap after all? Of course it was, stupid! I mean, how can Cauthrien already know about Howe's death if it wasn't? Rori was right all the time about Loghain's plan to use us to get rid of Howe...

Blast!

And now Anora... it somehow hurts. I've always believed her to be... good. Not only a good ruler but also a good person. But I also thought Loghain to be a hero until he ran from battle and condemned his king to die. I'm probably not very good at judging people.

"Unbelievable!" Ser Cauthrien exclaims.

"Yes, we can agree on that," Rori mutters, before she turns on her heels in one fluid motion to punch Anora straight in the face without as much as a warning.

Anora cries out and stumbles backwards. Not exactly the best way to prove our story of rescuing her true, but I'm so with Rori. She just beat me to it. Holding her bleeding nose, as she is pressed with her back against the wall now, Anora even has the nerve to call for help!

"Bring them down!" Cauthrien cries, her reaction prompted by Anora's lie. "Loghain wants the Wardens dead or alive."

Doom.

DOOM.

We are all wounded, Morrigan can hardly stand on her own anymore with all the spells she has cast already. Zevran cannot move his right arm, Barkley's limping and Leliana has only three arrows left. We cannot win this fight. And Rori knows it.

"Hurry back to Arl Eamon's. I will cause a delay..." she hurriedly makes up a plan as she has us all retreat, slamming the door shut in Ser Cauthrien's face. This will buy us some time, but it for sure won't save us. Maker, she must have brought the whole damn palace guard with her!

Oh, wait! Did Rori just say...? No! Oh no! That plan sucks! It needs to be changed...
"You mean, you and I will cause a delay," I correct her stubbornly.

"Alistair!" she cries in utter exasperation. I can see the fear and sorrow in her large dark blue eyes as it dawns on her that we are going to lose this time. "Alistair, please... there's only... us two Grey Wardens left..."

Nice try. So doesn't work. "You forget about Riordan," I point out. "Only death can do us part!" She glares at me furiously, I stare back with defiance. "Wishing Shale was here to drag me away?"

"If Shale was here, I'd have her crush Ser Cauthrien's head while she dances the Remigold on what is left of Anora," Gingersnaps presses through gritted teeth. "Only death do us part? You couldn't think of something more dramatic, no?" Rori sighs, a sad smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"How about: Where you lead, I will follow - till death. Or: I will stay with you until the dark waters of forgetfulness swallow us.... That's when Rori kisses me, it's a hasty crush of lips, full of longing and sorrow. Maker, I want to hold her tight and never let go!

Unfortunately that's when Cauthrien's mage blasts the door open with a fireball and we all run down the next corridor with Loghain's loyal bloodhound on our heels.

"What? You're sending us away so you can have all the fun alone...?" Zevran begins but Rori cuts him short.

"It's our only chance. They will take us captive if we surrender but someone has to tell Eamon what happened." She shoves Zevran away. "GO!" Reluctantly our companions leave. Well, not Barkley. It proves impossible to send the hound away. He stays at Rori's side even when she kicks him to make him leave. "Go, you stupid dog! They will kill you!" Barkley whines and retreats a few steps only to return to her side. "You and Alistair, you are the most stubborn males ever."

Now she's comparing me to the warhound. Charming. I do have to tell my flying dog foster parents from Anderfels. They'll be so proud of me!

"You sure about the captivity part?" I murmur when we both draw our weapons to defend ourselves.

"No," Rori admits. "I love you, Alistair," she adds, her voice shaking.

I don't even get the chance to tell her I love her, too, as Cauthrien and her men are upon us now. It's a very short, very nasty fight and when I hit the ground, my vision turning black, I beg the Maker that I will wake to see my beloved ginger again, alive and still kicking.

I do wake again.

I am still feeling awfully dizzy and have trouble coming back to my senses. My head feels like the Chantry soccer team was using it as a ball. I am disoriented as I lay on my back on the cold ground, naked but for my underwear. Some images cross through my mind... and none of them are pleasant. I remember being dragged into the dark... cries of agony echo through a vast hall... a cart loaded with blood stained corpses... a whole collection of instruments of torture and all well used... Fort Drakon.

Oh happy day!

Okay, be cool, Alistair! We've been in deep shit trouble before... You are still alive and as long as you are, there's a way out... there has to be... if Rori was here, she'd find one... I just wish the screaming would stop... it's giving me a skull splitting headache...

I should move... I must move... but I feel so heavy... rolling my head towards the light and the sound
of shrill screaming already makes me nauseous... and it's not getting better at the scene on display right there in front of me...

Rori is alive.

She is also kicking.

Actually it's the guards she's kicking at. A group of ten leering sneering men who try to pin her down while they tear the clothes off her. Their filthy hands are all over her body as they try to force her legs apart while she screams bloody murder...

"Keep still, bitch!"

"Stop kicking!"

"Maker, Kertram! Can't you even pin down a little girl?"

"She fucking bit me!"

"Little whore, I'm going to break you in..."

"Ha! She certainly bucks like a horse!"

Oghren always says, I could never become a berserk. He claims I am too soft... that a castrated nug has more balls than me... that I simply don't have it in me, the fury that erases all thought and only leaves room for a murderous frenzy...

Boy, is he wrong!

... I feel strangely seperated from my body, as if I had left it and was now floating above it, watching myself...

... as I rise from my stupor with a roar of fury and lunge myself at the first guard, slamming him against the wall first, then, getting hold of his hair, I ram him face forward against the corner of the table... repeatedly.

It all happens so fast... Not sure what happens next, though, or how I get to sit on top of another man and punch his face to a bloody pulp... there's a whole lot of yelling and shouting... I hear Rori scream my name... and those animalistic roars and growls, guess that's me... I get pulled away from the guard, many hands grab at me... I get punched, kicked... I feel bones breaking and skin being torn... but I don't feel any pain...

My frenzy carries on but my body betrays me. When I collapse on the ground, I can hardly breathe... something's stabbing my lungs... probably a broken rib... is that one of my teeth swimming in a puddle of my blood?... Oh fuck... is that a... finger? Ahaha, not mine. I do care for a better manicure... My eyes are swollen... but I still can see... I wish I couldn't...

"That thrice-cursed whorespawn killed Hank and Lowin!" Someone kicks my side, stabbing the broken rib deeper into my lungs...

"He fucking bit off my finger!"

"Where's the bitch? Get her here." I get pulled from the ground to a kneeling position, fingers fist in my hair, the cold sharpness of a knife pressed against my throat. "Now be a good girl or loverboy here is going to die, understand? Yeah, I thought you'd come to your senses. Have him watch! Hey,
asshole! Can you see that?"

Rori...

Oh Maker have mercy!

"What in the name of the Maker is going on?" a sharp voice snaps, causing the guards to let go of Rori, dropping her as if she was a life-size doll. Ser Cauthrien sails in as the last-second rescue - and I have never been so glad to see her. Bless her! Bless that woman! I lie in my own blood with several bones broken, including my jaw and I laugh... Okay, it's some strangled gurgling noise and it obviously sounds more as if I was dying because Cauthrien immediately sends for a healer and tells me to hold on...

When I wake next, I feel bruised and battered and cold but that's still an immense improvement. I'm still alive and that's actually all I care about when it comes to myself at the moment. I am far more concerned about Rori. They tossed her into the same cell in only her torn and bloodstained underwear. Even in the dim light of the torches I can see the bruises on her wrists, on her thighs, arms, even at her throat. Maker! I am going to kill these bastards! At this very moment I want them dead even more than Loghain. To push him from the throne of my top assholes of Ferelden is quite an achievement.

I crawl towards her to pull her into my arms, cradling her gently against my bare chest. She's so small, so young. She shouldn't be here, shouldn't be forced to carry that burden... Blast, I shouldn't be here! I am a Grey Warden and my job is to end the damn Blight - well, that's probably not going to happen unless the archdemon drops by to pay us a visit. It's that king-business that brought us here. I just should have said no and leave it all to Loghain...

Maker, now I do sound pathetic! But I guess, when locked up in the bowels of the nastiest dungeon of Ferelden, a few pathetic moments can be excused with the circumstances...

I brush Rori's dirty hair from her forehead and kiss her brow as I whisper to her how everything will be okay, that I will protect her, that I never will let anything happen to her again- and all the time I feel like crying. But boys don't cry, especially not when they just promised their girl to be strong for her. So I sit there and blink until the pressure behind my eyes becomes unbearable - and that's when I find it impossible to cry... so I sit there some more since I got nothing else to do and get all whiny about my eyes and how they hurt just so I do not have to deal with the real pain.

It seems an eternity until Rori finally opens her eyes. She groans - and is immediatelly sick on the floor. I can hardly let go of her quickly enough and then I stand there, holding her hair out of her face to stop it from getting any filthier than it already is.

"Al-Alistair? Wh-where are we?" she stammers, wiping her mouth clean. They didn't give us any water and as long as she doesn't intend to sip from the puddle of questionable content at the back of our cell, she'll have to deal with the acid taste in her mouth.

"You're finally awake. I was starting to worry. Are you... are you okay?" I help her back to her feet. She sways a little but doesn't seem injured beyond the bruises that litter her body. Those visible wounds are nothing I am too concerned about... But she was... she got almost... Maker have mercy... maybe this is not the best place to talk about that... "As for our whereabouts: We're imprisoned in Fort Drakon."

"Oh, wow. We do get around a lot, don't we? See all those awesome places where we've never been before," Rori says with a wry grin. Her choked voice betrays her fake cheerfulness.
"Join the Grey Wardens, see the sights and the floors of the best prisons in the land," I laugh, sounding rather hysterical to myself. Rori's grin still broadens, despite her hugging herself, looking so vulnerable as she stands there in her bloodstained panties. That she hasn't lost her sense of humour is a good sign, though. Right? Right? "That's not much of a recruitment slogan, is it? So, I do hope you have a plan?"

"Blast, yes, I have: I am going to strangle Anora when we get out of here," Rori hisses as she's already examining the lock and then un成功fully searches through our cell to see if she can find something to pick it.

"You mind if I pin her down while you do? Or perhaps kick her?"

"Hey, we're a team, right? In good times and in bad. Can't reserve all the fun for myself, can I?" Rori snickers before turning back to earnest. "Okay, plan... plan... let me think..." She begins to pace the cell. Finally she sits down and together we watch the guard on his watch. "Do you think, Barkley got away alive?" Rori bursts out.

"He's a very smart dog. I'm sure, he's fine," I reassure her, not believing a single word I say. But you just don't tell your girl that you think her dog is dead. "You know there's something about being trapt in a fortress full of people that want me dead that makes me think 'Hmm, being a templar might not have been so bad,'" I sigh when the guard passes us by a third time. Every time he nears our cell, he shortly stops to look at us... well, at Rori, to be precise. It is a stare I do not like as I have seen it before... Rori, pressing closer to me, must have noticed it to. A shudder runs through her whenever the leering guard reappears.

"With your luck, you'd have been in Cullen's place, locked up in a magical prison while the bloodmages toy with your sanity," Rori points out. Her voice has taken on a shrill sound close to hysterical by now. I can sense the rising panic inside of her with every minute passing.

"Hardly. Cullen's willpower is far stronger than mine. I more likely would have been possessed by a demon promising me cheese in return. Remember how easily I got fooled in the Fade?" My stomach rumbles loudly. "Do you think the others will come to rescue us? Maybe any time soon? I bet we missed at least two meals."

"I'm sure they will come. They would never abandon us. But I will not sit here and wait... until they... until he..." She inhales deeply, fighting with herself to regain her composure. I'm surprised anyway, she could keep it up for so long. The leering guard had it crumble and now she jumps into action, presenting a plan that is so downright stupid, I can hardly believe she even suggests it.

"Okay, let me get this straight," I say, frowning at her. "You want to seduce that guard..."

"... to cause a distraction..." Rori adds.

"... for me to break his neck?"

She nods, grinning sheepishly at me as she ducks her head when I scowl at her. "Are you freaking nuts?" I snap, grabbing her by her shoulders to shake some sense into her. Maker! Didn't she have enough for today? Does she really want to draw that kind of attention back to her? "What if he goes and calls his buddies so that they can finish what they have begun?"

"Well, do you have a better plan?" Rori hisses, pulling out of my grasp. "I am not going to sit here and wait for them to come... I need to get out of here, I have to... I need to wash them off..." Okay, breaking down now. No good. Absolutely no good. If we want to have a chance, we have to stay cool...
"Hush, kitten, please, I know it's hard, but try to clam down..." She backs away when I attempt to hug her for comfort. She practically jumps the moment I reach out for her.

"I can't just sit around and do nothing... just wait and not know what is about to come... I rather die trying than sit here and play the victim..." Now she's crying. That's not exactly the best way to seduce a man, although Rori claims that a man will always believe two things about a woman. One that she is weak and two that she finds him attractive. Where in the name of the Maker did she hear that utter bollocks?

I try to argue with her for her own sake, but she won't listen. So I grab her by the arm when she turns towards the cell door and she tries to shake me off. "Let go!" she yells and next the guard comes running.

"What the fuck are you two doing in there?" he growls, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. I hold up my hands to show I mean no trouble, letting go of Rori who immediately goes to set her plan into action...

Honestly, I do love her. But even I cannot make myself call her stumbling a sexy walk. And that smile she offers the guard looks more like a grimace of pain... and when she opens her mouth, she vomits right onto the guard's boots...

Alas, it was a stupid plan anyway.

"Blast!" The man jumps backwards, shaking his feet to get rid of at least some of the mess. "What the fuck? What's wrong with you? Are you ill? Is she ill?"

"Well, she's puking her guts out. What do you think?"

"Blast! Cauthrien is going to have my balls on a silver plater!" the guard mutters to himself as he begins to fumble around with the keys. "You have to be alive and well for the trial... Gonna take her to the healer... You!" He points at me. "Stand back!"

The door swings open, the guard walks in and bends over Rori who is on her knees, spitting bile onto the floor. As soon as he reaches out for her, she lunges at him, crushing her head against his nose in her upwards motion. That brief moment when his head is flung back by the impact and he exposes his throat, is enough time for her. With the precision of a battle maiden who has been trained by a badass assassin and the sneakiest Chantry sister of Thedas for almost a year now, she hits the side of his neck with the side of her hand - and with a surprised sigh the guard collapses to the ground.

With a fluid motion Rori is back to her feet, only to cling to the bars for support when she's getting dizzy. "You were right," she croaks, offering a crooked grin that widens when it dawns on her she actually really succeeded. "My idea sucked. So I went straight to plan B."

"Maker, Rori, you are indeed ridiculously awesome," I chuckle.

For the first time ever since we arrived at Fort Drakon I start to believe, we have a chance to walk out of here alive.
It's a mystery how we got here into the captain's office, all dressed up as new recruits and without anybody yet noticing our escape from the dungeons. We've been lying like troopers - okay, mostly Rori. My flustered stammering and stuttering would have gotten us back into a cell before I got a single sentence put together. Once we got out of the cell, she visibly pulled herself together and kicked herself back into functioning, dragging me along as she picked locks, stole clothes and weapons and then had the nerve to pretend she was a guard. Leliana would be so proud of her!

Thankfully, we both have a whole lot of practice when it comes to walking along the edge. The trick is not to stumble. And if you do, better not let it show.

Standing in the office now, my nerves are on edge and so are Rori's. We are like two sheep in wolf's clothing and I expect to get eaten anytime soon. I wish I could hold her hand but I fear the gesture would betray our true identity.

The captain, a broadshouldered weatherbeaten man, looks us all in the faces, scrutinizing the group of recruits in front of him thoroughly. Maker! He has to notice who we are. Our faces are all plastered across the wall behind his desk where he pinned our wanted posters. The other recruits all stare at the wall behind their captain. I really do hope they are as absent minded as I used to be during templar troup inspections. I sweat so badly, I practically swim in my armour.

"Aren't you a bit small for a guard?" the captain drones at spotting Rori amongst his recruits. I wince when he addresses her, squeezing my eyes shut. This is it. We're doomed...

"Size is not what makes a good guard, ser," Rori promptly answers in an awfully strained voice, keeping herself as straightened as she can possibly manage. She's still trembling but the captain doesn't seem to notice.

"Right," he nods, pleased with her answer. "You, yes, the blonde guy, what is it a guard should never forget?"

Huh? Who? I? Blast! What am I supposed to say? Something bright, something, something...

"Err... his discipline?" I stammer same time as Rori prompts 'honour' in a low whisper.

"Hmph, you aren't as stupid as you look... Haven't I seen you before?" the captain asks with squinted eyes as he leans across his desk for a closer view.

I squirm. Rori looks as if she was about to faint. "Err..."

Doom!

DOOM!

A knock at the door distracts the captain. "What is it?" he asks the entering guard.

"Ser Cauthrien sends you this list of names, ser."

"Ahh, what did they do this time?" the captain sighs as he scans the names, bringing his eyes so close to the paper that his nose almost touches it. Merciful Andraste! Fortune indeed favours fools! The man is short-sighted. Rori next to me heaves a sigh of relief.
"Attempted violation of a female prisoner, ser."

"Again? Suspend them for two weeks... no, wait, make it one. Don't have enough men anyway. If I had, this scum wouldn't be working here." His eyes meet Rori's when he throws the list back onto his desk and he furrows his brow. "Anything you want to say, recruit?"

"No, ser," Rori presses through gritted teeth. I so know what she's thinking. One blasted week of suspension? He has to be kidding! That's neither disciplined nor is it honourable behaviour. They should be rotting in the very same cell they tossed us in...

"Fine, now go out there and remember you represent Denerim's law and order. I want you to always keep that in mind and act to it," the captain instructs us. "I don't need any more troublemakers, do you hear me?"

We are dismissed when the captain turns his back on us. As he is frowning at our wanted posters now, we make sure to get away quickly. I'm not going to test my luck. Only Rori dawdles. I catch her stealing the list of names from the desk - together with a pair of glasses lying right beneath the sheet of paper - when I turn back to beckon her to hurry up. On closing the door I hear the captain mutter: "Now, where did I leave my glasses this time?"

My heart beats so fast, I fear it could break right out of my ribcage when we near the first gate. I can hardly hold myself back from repeatedly looking over my shoulder or stop my feet from running. Rori is shifting her weight nervously until I nudge her side. The recruits we have joined, give the right password - the gate opens and we stare right in the faces of Zevran and Leliana.

Ha! They sent the Sneaky Squad for our rescue. Good choice.

Rori gasps but turns it into a cough while I bite back a foolish grin and grab my own arm to stop myself from waving. Zevran and Leliana stay professionally unperturbed, not showing any signs of recognition as we walk past them. Assassins and bards! Creepy folks!

The alarm is raised the moment we walk through the main gates. Zevran and Leliana just make it out behind us before the gates are slammed shut. I do hope they waste some time on searching for us inside Fort Drakon. Preferably as much time as it takes us to return to Arl Eamon's.

"Andraste's flaming sword! Fortune favours fools! I never thought we'd make it!" I murmur once we've gotten rid of our fellow recruits - I'm afraid they are going to have a major headache and a whole lot to explain. "You came to rescue us..."

"Of course we did, silly boy. We couldn't just let you die, could we?" Leliana says softly as she hugs both Rori and me. "What ending would that have been for a story like yours?"

"This bitch queen threw you to the wolves and then she had second thoughts - well, about Rori. She'd have gladly left you rotting in that cell, Alistair, my friend," Zevran growls, frowning when Rori pulls the stolen list from her pocket, handing it to the assassin wordlessly. "I am still waiting for a reason not to slit her throat and toss her into the river. I haven't heard it yet." His expression goes blank as he unfolds the list and studies the names. Without saying a word, he then stuffs the paper into his mouth, chews and swallows.

"What...?" I laugh but one look at Zevran's face silences me. There's a glint in his eyes, murderous and determined that makes me shudder. It still takes me some time to finally realize what Rori has done...

Oh. Wow. Maker! She just hired an assassin... to get rid of some notorious rapists. That is... it's... it
for sure saves me a lot of work. Not sure I'd have chosen Zevran but since he's not far to seek...

Zevran might have been right after all. Mine and Rori's future could provide a lot of work for him. With all the political pressure added to our Mission Impossible, I am slowly getting used to the idea of solving problems in a final way.

All the way back to the Arl of Redcliffe's estate, Rori is very silent and very pale. Meanwhile I babble a whole lot of nonesense, about how Arl Eamon once bought me a golem doll in the Wonders of Thedas, about me sleeping in the kennels and how Maric and Cailan always acted as if I didn't exist even when I was right there... The past saves me from having to deal with the presence or the future. At least for now. I'm not fool enough to believe, I can run away forever.

On our arrival at Eamon's estate, Rori first gets jumped and thrown down by her exuberant mabari who slobbers all over her face, wagging his tail happily. Then she almost gets squished by her uncle, who whirls her around and hugs her tight. "I knew you'd make it!" he laughs and cries at the same time.

"I wouldn't have without Alistair. He saved me," Rori mutters.

I wish, she hadn't said that. Next I get bear-hugged by the huge bann who declares all our differences forgiven and forgotten. He even smacks some very wet kisses to my cheeks, calls me son and insists I should have a drink with him later. For now we are awaited by Arl Eamon. He doesn't even give us the time to bath and rest, get some food and recover from what we've been through. Wynne only makes a quick check on us, scolding us all the time for being so careless, and finds we've already been magically healed. Seems as long as we're not actually dying, we're supposed to keep going...

"Maker's Breath, it's good to see you in one piece," Arl Eamon exclaims as soon as we enter the study. We are all battered and exhausted, bruised and sweaty - and Rori is bristling with anger. Where she takes the energy from is totally beyond me. I am too tired to be furious right now. Anora also rises from her seat to greet us. Unlike us she's perfectly fine and healthy but for a slightly reddish and swollen nose.

"Indeed, after your rather alarming lack of faculty, I feared the worst for you," she says with a hint of displeasure. "I prayed for your safe return."

Rori and I gasp in unison at that much impudence. Maker, how can one person be so stuck up with herself? Are all rulers like that? I recall how Teagan fought next to the people of Redcliffe as if he was one of them. He did not let them down despite the danger. He did not put himself above them, marking himself worth more because of his ranks and titles.

Perhaps I'm not too tired for being angry after all.

"That's so sweet, it almost makes me want to kill you less," Rori hisses. Oh, she is hopping mad!

"Well, what did you expect me to do?" Anora scolds her. "You announced me to my father's most trusted knight. It destroyed the purpose of my disguise when I had clearly told you before I had to fear for my safety. I barely managed to slip away from her when we reached the palace."

"Well, we did not slip away. Thanks to you!" Rori cuts Anora short. "We got dragged to Fort Drakon! Ever been there? It really is worth a visit. The guards are the epitome of friendliness..." Her voice is shaky, croaked and she's furiously blinking back her tears, wiping her nose at her sleeve. With some effort she pulls herself together, straightening as she stares Anora down.

"Didn't I make clear I feared I would be killed?" Anora says calmly as if she was explaining the
obvious to a retard. For a moment it seems as if Rori was going to lunge herself at her. instead she takes one step back, her eyes glittering with contempt. Then her expression goes blank...

"Oh, of course! I do understand," Rori coos softly before Anora can go on. Her voice is as sweet as honey, low and smooth - and it gives me the creeps. Especially that smile... it's the freaking scariest smile I have ever seen on Rori. It even beats Gingersnaps' full toothed werewolf grin.

"I was afraid I could be killed when Howe and his men slaughtered everybody at Castle Cousland," Rori goes on in that dangerously low voice. "I was afraid to be killed when I fought my way through the Tower of Ishal to light a beacon that then got ignored. I was afraid to be killed when an army of undead attacked Redcliffe. Also at Kinloch Hold where I faced abominations, demons and blood mages."

Rori is stalking Anora now as if she was prey. The queen retreats one step whenever Rori makes one towards her until the wall stops her. "I was afraid to be killed when I fought some weirdo cultists and their high dragon to find the ashes of Andraste that would heal Arl Eamon's illness," Rori hisses, her voice dripping with acid now and becoming louder and louder. "And when I entered the Deep Roads, encountering giant spiders and darkspawn. And I was afraid to be killed by the werewolves in Brecillian Forest, by all the assassins your father sent after me and by Howe and his soldiers when I rescued you..."

Face to face with a rather meek and frightened Anora, Rori looks her right in the eye, shouting her last words at her. She's awfully agitated, her fists clenched at her sides, knuckles white. I almost expect her to punch the queen - again. Eamon obviously has the same thought, as he approaches Rori quickly, causing her to spin around and scowl at him icily. He tumbles backwards, expecting an attack, but she storms past him, stopping at the door where she turns back to the people gathered in the room and screams at the top of her voice:

"IF I HAD ACTED LIKE A BLASTED COWARD EVERY TIME I WAS AFRAID TO BE KILLED, NONE OF YOU WOULD BE FUCKING HERE TODAY!"

And then she leaves, slamming the door shut so forcefully that the portrait of Lady Isolde falls off the wall with a loud thud.

For a very long time, nobody dares to speak, so we can clearly hear Rori making her way through Arl Eamon's estate.

CRASH.

BOOM.

BANG.

She's obviously tearing down everything in her way, and I wince when she reaches the part where shining knight's armours line both sides of the corridor. She goes through it like a hurricane.

"I was hoping that despite our unfortunate beginning we can still work together," Anora says into the silence that follows once Rori has reached her room and slammed that door shut as well. "Will you hear me out?" she asks, turning first to Eamon and - when he nods in my direction - to me. The way she looks at me, she believes me to be no more than a fool. Somehow that makes me want to show her, I am not. At least not completely and solely.

"How about apologizing first?" I suggest, arms crossed in front of my chest.

"Apologize? What for?" Anora exclaims indignantly. "What?" she snaps at Barkley who has come
to sit next to her, looking up at her with huge puppy-dog-eyes. The mabari tilts his head to one side, then nonchalantly lifts his hindleg and pees onto Anora's shoes.

Priceless! Too bad Rori isn't here anymore.

The queen yelps and stumbles backwards, scowling at the assembled people who try hard not to laugh... okay, okay, the only one who tries is Eamon. The rest - including Shale - is roaring with laughter. Sten has lifted the corners of his mouth - both corners. I consider this roaring laughter from the Qunari.

"How dare you!" Anora's face is bright red with anger. "Take that mangy dog away from me! His manners match those of his mistress."

"I am accepting contracts, you know," Zevran whispers behind me. Oh, don't you tempt me!

"Give us information of how to defeat Loghain. You promised, you'd help us, remember?" I sigh, shaking my head at the rather disappointed assassin. I'd much more like to kick her out and send her back to her father - those two really deserve each other. Perhaps they would solve our problem by killing each other. Oh, what a family! "Tomorrow will do," I cut Anora short, earning myself a furious scowl from her. "For today, I'd very much appreciate if I wasn't bothered with your presence any longer."

Yep, that was rude. Very rude. And I am going to feel bad about it... perhaps... uhm... thinking about what happened to Rori and me because of that backstabbing mean bitch, maybe no...

Maker, if Anora had backed us up, there might have been at least a chance to talk to Cauthrien! But she didn't. She only thought of herself and didn't give a damn about what would happen to us. Understandable. But it for sure doesn't make me like her better. Can someone like her really be the good queen I believed her to be? How many and how much would she sacrifice to stay in power? And would this really be solely for the sake of Ferelden? I don't know nothing about ruling, but I know one thing for sure: I would not have backstabbed the people who risked their lives to save mine.

Blast.

Seems I do have to become king after all.

I leave, searching for Rori. It's not hard to find her. I only have to follow the trail of destruction she left behind.

On entering my - and by Rori's decision also her - room, I find her sitting in the bathtub, scrubbing her already bright red skin frantically while she bawls her eyes out. Wordlessly I disarm her, replacing the brush by a washcloth once I'm in the tub with her. She's tense first, shuddering when I touch her, but I patiently and gently coax her to relax against me, holding her while she cries.

I don't like to see her cry, but it feels good to be there for her, to be strong for her, to be needed. Somehow comforting her when she is hurt, takes away my own pain. Whenever I get overwhelmed by the chaos around us, when despair threatens to overpower me or when I just feel too confused and exhausted to move on, I only have to look at Rori and find a reason in her to keep going. She makes me look at myself from a different angle, makes me discover a strength I didn't know I had.

I bathe her and wrap her up in a towel as if she was a child, finding my own comfort in taking care of her. Rori trusts in me, she believes in me like nobody else before. I can be Alistair when I'm with her without fearing to disappoint.
Later that night, we snuggle against each other - and Barkley. It proves absolutely impossible to keep him out of bed. He's acting like a baby, howling and whining and scratching at the bedposts when Rori tells him to sleep on the rug. It's heartbreaking. Seeing him like that, I would never believe he is a murderous beast on the battlefield.

"Can you just hold me tonight?" Rori whispers.

"Your desire is my command. But you better ask your dog for permission," I chuckle. The huge mabari has squeezed himself in between us and occupies most of the space for himself. Only after bribing him with the leftovers of the cake Sten has sent us for supper, he retreats to the end of the bed. Praise the Maker, that dog is such a glutton or we'd have never gotten rid of him. "Are you... okay?" I ask once Rori is safe in my arms. It sounds like a stupid question to me. Howe, Fort Drakon... how could she possibly be okay?

Rori thinks about this for a moment while she caresses my face, her fingertips whispering across my cheekbones, brushing against my lips. The only sounds are the rain drumming against the window, Barkley's snoring and the crackling of the fire in the fireplace.

"Right now, I am," she finally murmurs. Her answer makes me smile, although it's not what I asked. "All the time I told myself, Howe's death would change something," she goes on after a moment of silence. "Perhaps it would if Loghain hadn't used us for his purpose... Still... I feel... relieved... that it is over now... but his ghost will keep haunting me nonetheless. The grief... it becomes dull somehow after some time... unless I get reminded of how Mama and Papa and Oren and Oriana died... Fergus, I don't even know what happened to him, if he's dead or not. Actually not knowing is the worst. Hope can be quite a bitch. It's like a festering wound that won't heal." She breathes a heavy sigh, but I can feel her smile against my skin when I place a kiss on top of her head.

"You'll make it through. You are strong."

Rori snorts. "Am I? I don't feel very strong today. Befiled and hurt and dispirited and... royally pissed! I am so sick and tired of being used and pushed around and manipulated," she pouts, punching her pillow.

"Yes, it's growing old," I agree.

"That's the universal fate of all pawns. And didn't you say, you're not a leader of man since you prefer to follow?" Rori teases.

"Not fair!" I laugh. "Anyway, that doesn't sound dispirited to me. That sounds as if you're going to kick some ass. Anora's. Loghain's. The archdemon's."

"You always act as if I did this all alone just by snapping my fingers." Rori punches me in the chest teasingly. "You and I were a team from the beginning. Your strength, your courage, your idealism, your love... and your ability to make me laugh when there's really absolutely nothing to laugh about... I wouldn't have made it without you. I love you, Alistair. And I need you." She inhales deeply as she is overwhelmed by her feelings. I am overwhelmed, too, Maker, I love her so much, it almost hurts. "You saved me today. Without you... I would... they would... oh bloody blast it!" Angrily she wipes the tears away that flood her eyes once more. "I'm such a cry baby tonight!"

I don't feel like having done anything to protect her. Quite the contrary. Maker! She would have surrendered to protect me! My useless attempt to save her only gave these bastards the idea she might care for me enough to give up herself. Actually Ser Cauthrien is the hero of the day. Now, isn't that ironic?
I hold Rori and I kiss her tears away. I also stop her from wiping her nose at the blanket and sacrifice yet another handkerchief to her. Ferelden has to be littered with handkerchiefs with my name stitched in as Rori keeps losing them always and everywhere. She cries herself to sleep in my arms, making me feel loved with the tears she sheds.

Sounds stupid and pathetic, doesn't it?

Well, she has a whole lot of reasons to cry, but at the same time she's the only reason for me to smile. She's making me happier than I ever expected to be. Happier than I deserve. I do hope, I make her days easier as well.
"Ahhh, an alienage. They're the same everywhere, aren't they?" Zevran exclaims cheerfully, inhaling deeply as he spreads his arms wide as if to embrace our surroundings.

I can't share his enthusiasm.

"This is a real alienage!" The bard squeals and claps her hands. "I've never been in one! How exciting!"

Or Leliana's.

This is the filthiest place of misery and neglect I have ever seen. Eamon's kennels are a palace compared to this. And they smell better. The same is true for its inhabitants.

"It is moments like this when I am grateful for the inability to smell," Shale mutters as she sidesteps a puddle of questionable content as not to stain her red dragon skin sandals.

"And here I thought elves all smelled of wildflowers and sunshine," Oghren grunts, sniffing the air.

"Feeling quite at home, aren't you, my sturdy little friend?" Zevran grins down at him as he takes the lead, having us all follow behind.

"Were your people being thrifty by building this place from refuse?" Sten remarks, taking in the ramshackle huts, the muddy streets - although I suspect it's not all mud we're wading through considering the smell - and the people that reek of misery.

"Err... we're not going to be mobbed, right? That's not something elves do here? Mob people?" I whisper nervously to Rori as we pass by some elves that don't look happy at all to see us.

Rori takes one look over her shoulder at our assembled companions, then at the elves lurking in the shadows. "Let's not give them a reason," she says. If this is meant to soothe my worries, it doesn't work. "Look at them! They have enough problems already. They don't need more." She's been rather silent this morning - and not at all looking forward to our trip to the alienage. As it's Anora sending us here, this could be another trap and us walking right into it - again.

As we get deeper into the alienage, I begin to feel pretty much ashamed.

I thought, I've seen poverty. Boy, was I mistaken! There seems to be quite a difference between human and elvish poverty... Not that I ever wasted much thought on elves and the way they live... To me they always just were there and it seemed so... natural that they would be servants and, well, lower than any human...

I mean, I've never ever called an elf a knife-ear, not even a rabbit. That's just rude. But I've always accepted their fate. The Revered Mother used to say everybody has their place in the world as ordained by the Maker. And this filthy slum, it's the elves' place...

The Maker moves in mysterious ways...

I wonder, if HE ever cared to move here at all.

"Don't!" Rori stops me when I begin to rummage in my pockets when passing by an invalid who on spotting us, calls out to us, claiming he has fought in Ostagar.
'But...' How can she just walk by this misery and do nothing at all?

"We can leave some coins with their Elder later. They will know what is needed most to help their community." That's the teyrn's daughter talking. I can hear it in her voice, see it in the way she holds herself. And the elves see it, too, making room for us to pass through. Rori doesn't even look at them and when she does, it's as if she was looking right through them, as if this misery didn't exist for her. At the same time she's tense as if walking on eggshells.

"You start tossing around coins, you could get mobbed after all," she explains softly, taking my hand in her small one. The way she chews on her lower lip there's yet more to come. I just have to wait patiently until she makes up her mind about telling me. I gently rub my thumb against her palm to soothe her nerves, earning myself a wry smile. Sighing, she finally goes on: "I did that once in Highever. Sometimes Father took Fergus and me with him when he had teyrn business to do with the Elder. It was the second time we went there and I had stuffed my pockets full of coins, I was jingling with every step I took. I thought, I would help them." She inhales deeply, her voice becoming very small. "First there were only a few but there kept coming more and more, pressing in on me. I stumbled and fell and they were all around me, the crowd being pushed forward by those in the back. I panicked, fearing they would trample me. Father and his guards tried to get to me and the crowd panicked when one of them drew his weapon. In the end I was responsible for the deaths of twelve elves and more than two dozen injured."

"But... you were only a child. And... you meant well." I cannot stand how guilty and sad she sounds. Rori didn't want anybody to get hurt. It all just went wrong.

"I was 15," Rori corrects compunctiously. "Hardly a child anymore. Everything that happened was my fault. Afterwards there were riots that got beaten down, more victims on both sides and the teyrn's work of a decade destroyed. My father had warned me before. But I thought, I knew better and just ignored him. He said, I learnt my lesson. A fool meaning well can cause irreparable harm. I doubt my intentions made it any less tragic for the families. Or any less difficult for my father to regain the elves' trust." She sighs, rubbing her eyes tiredly. "Let's just try and not blow up the whole alienage accidentally, yes?"

Most elves have gathered in the place near the huge tree at the center of the alienage. It's a crowd of frightened, desperate and angry people. We are met with suspicion - when we are lucky - and hostility - when we aren't that lucky. They are pretty reluctant to talk to us shems, so Rori decides, Zevran should take a look around on his own to collect some information.

Meanwhile we stand away from the crowd, trying not to draw any attention or - even worse - trouble... It takes exactly thirty seconds and trouble stumbles upon us - literally - by running straight into me.

"Forgive me," the bald templar exclaims, his bleary eyes are looking right through me. "I didn't see you." I wave my hand in front of his face until Wynne swats it away and scowls at me with that evil teacher look that she always wears when either Rori, Barkley or I misbehave. I grin sheepishly and shrug.

"You are blind," the granny mage observes with sympathy.

"Partially," the templar confirms, introducing himself as Ser Otto. Out of some reason that is totally beyond me, his fellow templars have left this poor man alone to investigate something strange - like he calls it - in the alienage. I feel so sorry for Otto. He has his heart in the right place. And despite being an invalid, he's still here to fight for a good cause.

"Now, that's what I call devotion," Rori mutters. "Cullen would love him!"
"Can you help me?" Otto asks humbly after finishing his story about the disturbing feelings he had that there is something really really evil anywhere close by.

Rori and I look at each other at the same time, nodding our agreement. Some potentially dangerous or even deadly mission that will earn us nothing but some more nightmares? Sure, we're in! That's what we are there for, yes? And what else could we do while waiting for Zevran, stand around and pick our noses? Oghren's already been doing that and then he ate what he dug up...

Ewww!

So Ser Otto it is!

"You sure we're not going to accidentally blow up the alienage that way?" I whisper to my fellow Grey Warden.

"I'm afraid one never really knows beforehand," Rori sighs.

"See, that's what I do not like about decisions and responsibility," I mutter.

"Oh, bloody blast it! Let's give it a try! We can't cause more destruction than the archdemon, can we? And that's what Grey Wardens are there for, aren't they? Okay, actually we're there for the darkspawn but since we're already in the neighbourhood and something strange is happening... who else could they call?" She shrugs and grins sheepishly.

I laugh and whirl her around, singing: "There is something strange in the neighbourhood, who you gonna call?"

"GREY WARDENS!" Rori chimes in with me.

"There is something weird, and it don't look good. Who you gonna call?"

"GREY WARDENS!" we both shout as we come to a halt, bowing to our audience. Sten has another facepalm moment while Wynne just chuckles and mutters: "Ahh, children!"

"Grey Wardens? Didn't you..." Otto begins.

"Lad, you either face the sodding evil with these crazy nut-lickers backing you up," Oghren snorts. "Or it's you all alone."

Ah, the choice between the devil and the deep blue sea!

When we walked past the marvellous tree in the center of the alienage earlier, Morrigan said with a voice so mellow, that for a tiny little moment I could see the Morrigan that Rori claims is hiding behind the bitch-witch-front: "A tree planted in the middle of misery? It rather beckons a single, sad little tear, does it not?" I already saw my world crumbling down, everything I used to believe gone, but when Rori decides to help Otto, Morrigan makes it all right again by being, well, just Morrigan. "What are we going to do next?" she groans. "Rescue kittens from trees?"

"At least a kitten wouldn't try to kill us on first sight," Rori laughs, making me wonder if she has ever dealt with a frightened or unwilling cat. She grins broadly at me when I kick the door to the abandoned orphanage open for her.

"Ladies first." I bow to her.

"Thank you, your Highness." She giggles and blows me a kiss.
From that point on everything is a sodding mess - Oghren's words, not mine. Ghosts, demons, more ghosts, more demons. It's so freaking creepy, with the voices of children whispering twisted nursery rhymes - children that aren't there because they are long dead. And when we think we're finally through and nothing, really nothing can happen to us anymore, that thrice cursed whorespawn of a demon kills poor Otto right in front our eyes.

Oh happy day!

"You all look as if you have seen a ghost," Zevran greets us on returning to our meeting point the same time as we do.

"Several," Rori admits with a wry smile. "And demons." She is about to slump down, but one closer look at the ground makes her reconsider and she leans against Shale instead.

"One cannot leave you alone. Not even for five minutes," Zevran observes. He has a redheaded elven woman in tow who turns out to be Darrian Tabris' cousin. She is not as delighted as one would expect to hear from him...

"That two-faced bastard took Kendells' money and left us there at his mercy," Shianni hisses when Rori delivers the message Darrian has asked her to bring his family. "He hopes we're alright? Bullshit! How alright does he think I could be when he knows that son of a bitch Vaughan Kendells raped me! And he did absolutely nothing about it once Kendells offered him coin, that greedy pig! You're delivering messages? Punch that asshole in the face next time you see him!"

"Seems Darrian didn't tell us the whole truth about why he can't return to Denerim," Rori mutters sourly.

"So this one here," Shianni points at Zevran who is lost in a dreamy observation of her bosom, "claims you are here to help the elves of this alienage." She doesn't sound convinced. And the way she scrutinizes us with her arms crossed in front of her chest, she isn't impressed either. "Beggars can't be choosers," Shianni sighs. "You certainly didn't come here for us but whatever reason, if it puts an end to people disappearing, then I'll give you any information you need."

Rori was afraid we could blow up the whole alienage. The only thing we do blow up is Loghain's slavetrade deal with Tevinter. Rori goes for a zero tolerance policy with the slaver boss and evil blood mage Caladrius and at least some of the elves return home safe and sound.

It still doesn't feel like we won here. Maker, how long has Loghain been doing this? And what for? Money? I am so hopping mad, if anybody asked me right now if I made a better ruler than Loghain or his daughter, I'd say: Bloody yes I do! But that's only the heat of the moment. Wait until I sober in about, duh, five minutes and I'll be back to being just Alistair putting his foot in his mouth as soon as he opens it.

"He should have tried with slaying a dragon and stealing its treasure," Zevran remarks, heaving a sigh.

"He was too busy killing his own people in a stupid civil war," I growl. All this effort and energy wasted on destruction and death when he could have worked on actually saving this nation and its people! I grew up with stories of the Hero of the River Dane, and now - with all the glorification having gone down the drain - I find he's just an obstinate megalomaniac tyrant who seems to have lost all sense of honour and integrity.

It's sad. Really, it is.
What's even more sad - and it makes me feel awfully ashamed - is the elves' reaction on us ending the evil schemes of the Tevinter mages. Wynne and Leliana volunteer to take care of the infected elves, helping wherever help is needed, while Rori stays true to her promise and leaves all the money we took from the slavers and some more with Elder Valendrian. We receive a whole lot of gifts and good wishes in return and I find myself sitting there on a rickety bench beneath the huge tree, accepting the gratitude I don't feel I deserve with a stupid grin frozen to my face.

"Oh, does all the dirt and poverty make you uneasy?" the redheaded elf mocks me mercilessly as she notices how uncomfortable I am. Shianni makes me feel as if the suppression of the elves was all my fault. "That's why there's the high wall built all around this alienage, so that shems like you don't get bothered with our misery."

Ow! Ouch! Her words are like a slap in the face. Maker, I do feel like a complete jerk... probably because I am a complete jerk...

Taking a look around, Morrigan wrinkles her nose. "And these elves allow themselves to be herded together in this filth why, exactly?"

"So many believe it better to live than to die in a rebellion," Shianni comments. Her tone has me presume she is none of the peaceful endurers. She was surprised to find humans would care enough for elves to help them. Then she found out, I am a claimant of the throne and her respect went right out of the window. I can't blame her. Not after what I have seen here...

"Isn't there anything we can do?" I wonder out loud, not sounding like a soon-to-be-king at all. If I end up becoming king... I told you, I would sober, didn't I? I'm back to being reasonable now. Yep, me being reasonable, we all know, that's not going to lead anywhere. Well, not Rori. She is adorably naive when it comes to overestimating me and my abilities.

"Aren't you going to become king?" Shianni snaps, challenging me by staring me straight in the eyes, causing me to become all flustered. Zevran next to me moans loudly. He sits with his elbows propped on the table and his chin resting on his hands and hasn't taken his eyes off Shanni ever since we returned with Valendrian and the other rescued elves.

"Ahh, such a wildcat. Do you think she's as feisty between the sheets?" he murmurs, wetting his lips. "What an intriguing woman!"

Shianni is completely oblivious to Zevran's dreamy looks. She's ranting and I am her target. "Take a close look, your Highness. And remember when you have the power to make a change." Slamming her small fist down on the table, she makes me jump. I grin sheepishly, not sure what to say or do. Merciful Andraste, I'm not yet king and already someone is urging me to make a major decision!

"You know, it's not that easy," Rori points out to her.

"Is it not?" Shianni challenges her but Rori is not in the mood for a dispute. The elven woman wouldn't let her off the hook that easily if not for the little elven girl who shyly approaches us. She's a skinny brat of six or seven years of age, with a snoty nose and dirty blonde hair and huge blue eyes. She's so frightened she's trembling and it's surprising she actually finds the courage to talk to Rori.

"Excuse me," she mumbles, curtseying several times in a row and dropping the ragged lump that turns out to be a plush rabbit when I pick it up for her. I smile at her, but she only stares at me, frozen in fear.

"Aww, that's a real cute rabbit. Does it have a name? I once had a miniature golem doll. I named it Rocky."
"What an incredibly stupid name for a golem," Shale mutters.

"Here, don't be afraid." The girl jumps at my attempt to give the rabbit back to her, then snatches it from me and presses it to her chest. For a moment she seems to have changed her mind, backing away from us.

"People say you are a lady from Highever," she then blurts out. "My mamae went to Highever with Lady Landra. She... she hasn't returned yet..." Her eyes fill with tears and although she wipes them away angrily, she cannot hold them back. "Granny went into the sickhouse and never came back. I'm all alone."

"You're Amethyne, Iona's little daughter," Rori gasps and for a moment the girl's face lights up at the mentioning of her mother's name. Her smile dies, though, when she sees the sadness and sorrow in Rori's face. "I am so sorry," Rori whispers, her voice husky with her effort to keep herself from crying in front of the child. "She won't come back."

The girl stubbornly shakes her head. "Mamae wouldn't leave me alone!"

"She can't come back," Rori whispers. "She's dead. I am so very sorry, Amethyne."

It's devastating to see how the hope in the girl's eyes just die like the flame of a candle blown out by the cold wind. Then she just turns on her heels and bolts away, not listening to Rori calling after her.

Amethyne's plush rabbit lies face down in the mud. This time it's Rori to pick it up, holding it out to her dog. "You have to find her, Barkley."

On our way back to Arl Eamon's our little party has gained one more member.

"I cannot leave her alone. I feel responsible for her," Rori defends her decision to drag Amethyne along. The girl is still so shocked, she hardly comprehends what's happening around her. The only one she interacts with is Barkley. He found her after she ran away. He coaxed her into coming with us and now he even allows her to ride him.

"Sodding mongrel," the dwarf grunts. "He could have carried good old Oghren into battle but he rather plays little pony for a kid." Barkley tilts his head to one side and barks happily, wagging his tail. "Argh," Oghren snorts. "Next she's going to tie sodding pink ribbons to your tail! What are you? A warhound or a lapdog?"

"He is a warhound that believes to be a lapdog," I laugh. I have first hand experience with that oversized puppy squeezing himself in between Rori and me. Or he drops his huge head into my lap and somehow always manages to hit my crotch so hard, he makes me whimper in pain. I swear he does that on purpose. But it's still better than having the whole dog try to sit on Rori's lap whenever Schmooples curls up in Leliana's.

On our arrival at Arl Eamon's estate, Anora already awaits us impatiently. As soon as we stumble through the door, she comes to greet us... Well, actually she comes to greet Rori and acts as if the rest of us is non-existent. Okay, she does acknowledge me with a depreciatory frown.

"It's about time you return," the queen says. "I have to talk to you about you supporting me at the Landsmeet."

"What!?” Rori gasps. She's tired, she's sweaty, covered in gore and dirt and now she's slack-jawed in addition. She's not alone. I dare say we all look like a shoal of gaping carps. "Wait! As far as I recall it's you supporting Alistair! You promised before we went to rescue you from Arl Howe!"
"You cannot expect me to keep a promise made in a state of emergency," Anora snorts as if even considering, she could have at least some sense of honour, was nothing but absurd. "Now it's time for you to stop being childish and do what is good and right for Ferelden."

"Pardon!?" Rori squeaks. "I have absolutely no intention to talk to you after what you did..."

"I came here to talk to you personally," Anora points out, cutting Rori short.

"You shouldn't have bothered!"

"I knew your mother and I do want to believe that there's at least a little bit of Eleanor inside of you," Anora goes on while Rori's face takes on the colour of a very ripe tomato. "I expect you in my room in half an hour. I recommend you make use of that time and refresh yourself. You are... filthy." Thus said, the queen turns on her heels and marches off.

Rori with her fists clenched at her sides looks as if she was about to explode. "Argh!!! I so FUCKING HATE her!"

"Language," Wynne sighs, clapping her hands over Amethyne's ears to protect the girl from hearing any more of Rori's rather explicit outburst that is accompanied by kicking around some more of Eamon's fancy decoration. Isolde will throw a fit when she returns to the Denerim estate.

"I'd consider supporting her," Leliana coos softly once Rori is done freaking out.

"Never!" Rori snaps. "I'd rather place a retarded monkey on the throne than her!"

"That's the most apt description of Alistair you have ever given," Morrigan mumbles.

HEY!

"Rori, darling, she'll never support you. She'll do anything to keep her power. If you want to win against her, you have to make it a case of the biter bit."

"You mean, I should just lie to her?" Rori doesn't sound convinced although she seems to consider the idea.

"You already played that game once in Orzammar," Leliana reminds her, smiling so sweetly it creepes me out. That bard is evil. All the sister act, that's only a disguise. "Make Anora believe you are going to side with her."

"Right now I'd rather strangle her," Rori growls. Zevran, Shale and I lift our hands at the same time to announce we would gladly assist her. "We're like cats and dogs. How in the name of the Maker should I ever convince her I like her enough to back her up?"

"You do not have to like her, darling," Leliana pats her arm comfortably. "You didn't like Behlen, did you? It's all about politics and tactics. You only have to make her believe that you regard her as the one leader Ferelden needs in these times of trouble."

Rori just snorts.

No surprise there.

I snort the same time as she does.

Now, that... that really is surprising...
"Who the fuck does she think she is?" Rori flings her boots into the corner. Her rainbow-coloured archdemon-socks and leather vest follow.

"Uhm... the queen?" Actually I'm as furious as she is, but Rori's so adorable when she's mad, her cheeks burn red and her eyes flash and then there's this incredibly cute pout. Add the fact that she's shoving down her tight leather pants while she keeps ranting, bent forward as she hobbles around to kick the pants of her feet, her curly red hair bouncing around her head - I just cannot help it...

"You're so cute when you're angry!"

"I am not cute!" Rori snaps, causing me to laugh out loud.

"Isn't that my line?" I tease, reaching out to help her untie her blouse. She swats at my hands and pulls the ties open herself, tossing the blouse aside unceremoniously. She neither wears a breastband nor one of these rather sexy but awfully tricky to open bras.

"What happened to all the fine Orlesian lingerie?" I wonder, smiling a hello! at her magnificent bosom.

"Too small," Rori huffs as she slips out of her panties. I catch them when she tosses them into my direction. "Too uncomfortable." She marches over to the washing bowl sitting on the dressing table. In the light of the candles there, the bruises at her neck become visible when she pulls back her hair. The imprints of fingers around her wrists, the marks at her thighs... She has a whole lot of reasons to be furious.

Rori rolls her stiff shoulders before reaching for the wash cloth. For a moment she just stands there with her head bowed and her shoulders slumped, hugging herself with the wash cloth pressed to her chest. When she lifts her gaze, she examines her reflection in the mirror as if this pale faced girl with the huge dark blue eyes was a complete stranger.

Rori's so lost in thoughts - and I doubt she's day dreaming - that she doesn't notice me approaching and jumps when I put my hands gently onto her shoulders.

"Hush, kitten," I whisper softly and my reward is a small smile across the mirror. She still looks wary, though, hugging herself even tighter, seemingly uncomfortable with her nakedness. She's so tense, I begin to massage her shoulders but she does not relax, quite the contrary.

"Alistair, I... I don't think... I don't feel like... I... need some time...," she stammers, sounding as meek as she looks. "I'm... I'm sorry."
Huh?

What? What is she talking about? What is it she can't do? And why would she be sorry? She looks as if I downright scare her...

Oh!

Oh Maker!

I do hope Zevran's more than just a loudmouth and works off that list of names Rori gave him rather quickly. Or I will have to do it myself.

"Rori, don't apologize. There's really nothing you have to be sorry for." I lift my hands off her shoulders, taking one step backwards.

"I... it's so mean. I thought, it wouldn't matter... I thought, I just could... but I can't... It's you. And you would never hurt me... I... I just cannot help it... I can't right now!" Blast! Now she's crying, And I don't know what to do. Hugging her doesn't seem to be a good idea right now. She let me hold her last night but it was all just cuddling and there was this silent agreement it wouldn't become more.

"Whoa, Rori, stop that! Don't be sorry. It's alright, really." What does she think, I would do? Be mad at her? Dump her? Force her to do something she doesn't want to? She really should know me better! But... I guess, she's too upset right now. That was two very rough days for her.

Her confrontation with Howe and what he spat at her about her family dragged her right back into that nightmare of Highhever. Then Anora's betrayal got us into Fort Drakon and she got almost violated. These bastards had their hands everywhere all over her body and that they didn't get to do more was mere luck and Ser Cauthrien's good timing. And if that wasn't enough, meeting that little girl who lost her mother in Highhever during Howe's attack, is yet another reminder when she's already unstable. Add the events in the alienage with ghosts and demons and bloodmages and, yeah, well, you get the picture.

I'm not as happy as a sandboy myself, but that's mostly because I am concerned about Rori. I love her. And after Fort Drakon I can honestly say, I love her more than my own life. I'd do anything, absolutely anything to protect her.

"Can I... can I hug you?" I ask shyly, raking my hand through my hair nervously.

Rori nods slowly, looking timidly at me across the mirror. Then she turns abruptly and flings herself at me as if she was afraid she wouldn't find the courage inside of her if she hesitated. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close while she cries.

All these tragedies, our brushes with death, I still feel as long as Rori and I are together, we have a chance to survive and perhaps even be happy. Or I'm just fooling myself and these wounds will never heal. Whenever I utter such doubts Rori usually defiantly declares that we will have our happy ending. But now when she wipes her snotty nose at my shirt as she nuzzles against my chest, it's her to doubt.

"What are we doing here, Alistair?" she whispers hoarsely. "How could we ever believe we could stand a chance? We should just run as fast and far as we can and leave this all behind..."

"Hey, hey! What happened to 'Bloody blast it, let's give it a try'? We've come so far, we cannot run away now. It was you who told me you could never forgive yourself if you gave up."
"You shouldn't always listen to me," Rori mutters, banging her forehead against my chest repeatedly. She sounds so devastated and not at all like the fearless leader everybody wants her to be.

"We'll get through this together," I remind her, placing a kiss on top of her head.

"First I have to get through a meeting with Anora alone," Rori pouts.

"I could accompany you," I offer. "She's not in the position to order you around."

"I doubt Leliana's plan is going to work when we put you and her into the same room," Rori sighs as she shrugs out of my embrace. She returns to the dressing table to wash herself. Usually I'd snatch the washcloth from her and clean her... and then one thing leads to another and... happy lamppost licking! Of course I can behave myself! Maker! But she's so hurt, I don't even want to appear as if I was pushing her, so I sit on the bed and try to appear busy by emptying my whole backpack onto the floor. The stench is unbearable - and I am utterly relieved when I find it's not my socks but the dead rat Barkley must have dropped into my backpack like ages ago...

"Uhm... see you later," Rori murmurs when she's ready for her confrontation with Anora. It's a bit of an awkward moment and I don't know what to do, so I clumsily lean in to give her a peck on the cheek same time as she moves forward and we bang our heads together.

"Ow!" I rub my forehead, grinning goofily. "Sorry, that was... I didn't mean..." That's when Rori grabs me by the front of my shirt and pulls me into a kiss, her boldness fading when we're so close that our lips are almost touching. "Are you sure?" I whisper, not daring to move, while Rori makes up her mind. She looks at me with those beautiful dark blue eyes, round and wide and so full of sadness.

Maker have mercy! Really, I mean it! For once HE could go easy on her and just give her a rest. But somehow I doubt it. We're only at the beginning of our journey.

"Bloody yes, I am," Rori breathes - and then she kisses me, crushing her lips against mine.

Maker's Breath! This feels so right. The way her body presses against mine, the softness of her lips, our tongues intertwined, her taste filling my mouth... My arms tighten around her waist and we kiss until we're both breathless and flushed.

When we're forced to let go, Rori's eyes shine. You can still see, she's been crying but once again she has found a way to recover her strength. And now this ravishing woman smiles at me so lovingly, it makes me shudder in awe.

"Soooo, off to Anora," Rori sighs, reluctantly letting go of me. I'm unwilling to part from her now... and I really don't see why I have to... sooo... what can I say? Those five steps that seperate us from the door are enough room for some more kisses...

"Go in and win!" I call after my beloved fellow Warden when she finally is on her way to meet the treacherous queen. Rori's thoroughly late, having made Anora wait for another half an hour. Good of her!

Ten minutes after Rori is gone, I get summoned to meet Arl Eamon in his study. With a wide and cheeky grin plastered all across my face, I bounce down the corridor, passing by the mabari who has slumped down in a dark corner and with thorough satisfaction gnaws on and drools all over some rather familiar looking shoes.

"Barkley!" I exclaim and the dog's head rockets. Shoe still locked between his jaws, the mabari is the personification - or in his case the doggy-ification - of guilt. At spotting me, he drops the shoe and
casually covers it with his large paw, trying to look innocent when he so isn't. "Was that Anora's shoe?" I inquire.

Barkley tilts his head to one side and whines.

"Don't worry, old boy, I'm not going to peach on you."

The dog barks happily and wags his tail, before going back to thoroughly ruin Anora's fine footwear.

"You're such a good boy," I praise him, patting his head before I move on to meet with Eamon.

"And, you know, I've found that dead rat in my backpack. You should find a new hiding place for it, don't you think?"

The arl for sure doesn't beat around the bush. "Alistair, we have to discuss your future as king," he says before I even get to close the door behind me. "You are the last of the Theirin bloodline and thus your death without producing a heir first would most likely cause another civil war."

By now I have managed to reach the chair Eamon points out to me and slump down.

"Your affection for Rori Cousland is quite obvious," the arl goes on, pacing the room casually as he introduces me to his plans. "She is the last of her bloodline, too, but the Couslands still have strong allies and she will regain the teyrnir once you are king. I am quite sure, you won't object to marrying her, will you?"

"Err..."

"Is she fertile? And healthy? You have been in an intimate relationship with her for how long?"

"Whoa! Wait! We're not discussing this, are we? This is private!" I squeak, squirming on my chair. Eamon glares at me like he used to do when I was called to his office as a little boy when I played a prank on one of the maids or stole cheese from the larder and the imprints of my teeth convicted me.

"Alistair, it is essential that she can conceive," Eamon snaps.

"Well, she can't. With two Grey Wardens together, the chance to have a baby is practically zero," I stammer, taken aback by Eamon's forcefulness.

"Then you cannot marry her," Eamon says matter-of-factly.

"What!? Whoa, noooo! This... this is not your decision!" I feel like someone's pulled a rug from under my feet. I am falling and I'm afraid, when I hit the ground I won't be able to get up again.

"Alistair, you are going to be king. You have a responsibility to secure the succession to the throne. Cailan died without an heir and look where we are now!"

"Well... then I'm not going to become king!" I say defiantly. The way Eamon looks at me very much reminds me of Morrigan. I guess that means I totally failed at sounding strong and manly.

"Don't be ridiculous." Thus said Eamon turns his back on me and talks to his bookshelf, uttering thoughts out loud that aren't meant to be commented on. "Rori Cousland is no option. We have to find you a wife quickly. Juliana Mac Eanraig maybe. Choosing Angus' daughter could also calm him down for you breaking up with his niece..."

"I do not want to..."

"Though Juliana is already 24. A younger wife would be preferable. Since Cousland cannot have
heirs, you could give Highever to her uncle to ensure his support.”

"Pardon!?” I sit there slack-jawed and can't believe what's happening. The arl cannot possibly expect me to backstab Rori by not only dumping her but also sell her teyrmir away to her own uncle! This is... this is... politics.

"Habren Bryland is 15...,” Eamon ponders about some more women I could marry. Women I do not know... or in this case... a child.

"Isn't that a bit young?"

"Younger than her are happy mothers made," Eamon points out. "Her father is partly Orlesian - that could cause trouble with the other nobles, but could bring us back into peace talks with Orlais. I wouldn't recommend a wife from Orlais or anywhere else. The nobles of Ferelden need a royal heir of a Fereldan bloodline."

"Stop!" I groan, but Eamon knows no mercy.

"There's Anora of course. I suspect she cannot conceive but marrying her for now would secure the allegiance of both our supporters and Loghain's. In case she wouldn't give you a son within - let's say - the next three years, you could still divorce her. Even if she had supporters, I doubt there would be many. A barren queen is like a dead horse - you should find a new mount then."

Someone's making strange gurgling noises... it's me. Andraste's flaming sword! Did that man just say I should marry Anora! And have a child with her... which means I would have to... she would... lick my lamppost!

Doom!

DOOM!

I am getting quite an impression of how Rori has to feel after all those men groped her breasts and shoved their fingers between her legs... and that awful woman hasn't even touched me yet! The mere imagination...

Ew!

EWWWWWWWWWW!

"I think, I'm going to be sick," I mutter.

"Pull yourself together, Alistair! Ferelden needs a strong king. A king who does whatever is necessary to protect his people and his kingdom."

"Yeah? Then why don't you become king!?" I snap, anger rising inside of me. He cannot expect me to do any of this when I so do not want to. I mean, I get that there has to be an heir to prevent a civil war - in case there's a kingdom left after the Blight. But... Merciful Andraste, help me! I... I cannot live without Rori... I love her... how could I...

I feel like crying but I doubt it would make a good impression if I started bawling in front of Arl Eamon.

"We already talked about that, didn't we?" Eamon sighs, sounding as if he was talking to a retard. "I wouldn't tell Rori Cousland right away," he goes on. "We need her and the Mac Eanraig's support at the Landsmeet. The Fade has no fury like a woman scorned."
"Okay, let me get this straight," I croak, not sounding at all like myself. "You want me to break up with the love of my life so I can marry someone who I do not love and produce an heir of the Theirin bloodline and - as if that wasn't bad enough - you also want me to act like a base bastard and only discard Rori like useless waste after I put her upon?" My voice becomes louder and louder with every word, menacing and angry. I am hopping mad as I rise from my chair so abruptly that I knock it over. My face is contorted in fury and my fists are clenched at my sides. I have trouble to rein myself in as not to punch the arl straight in the face.

The effect on Eamon: zero.

He stays all calm and composed and makes me feel like a complete idiot when he comes around the desk and puts a hand on my shoulder. "This is asked much of you, your Highness," he says with sorrow in his voice.

"Too much!" I press through gritted teeth.

"But a king," Eamon goes on as if I had said nothing at all."A good king is not a free man. His wishes, his dreams and visions, they do not count when they compete with the needs of his people and the safety of his kingdom."

Great. Just great.

I really wonder why anybody wants to be king - or queen. But I guess they don't waste too much thought on the responsibility part. I wish I was like that. I wish I could give a damn. Then I could tell Eamon to shut the fuck up and do however I please.

Unfortunately I'm the nice-boy-type.

So if I now said no, I would mark myself as a selfish ignorant fool, no more than a defiant child with a crown too big for his head.

Oh Maker, what Eamon says makes sense... I know, he is right... that he's only being reasonable, although I begin to miss the difference between his games and Loghain's...

My heart... I can feel it breaking... I... I am dying inside. And I'm sounding awfully pathetic... What is left for me if there's no Rori? If her sweet smile doesn't greet me in the morning? If her warm embrace isn't comforting me in the middle of the night? If she wasn't there to fool around with me and make me laugh? I... have wondered before... but that was about her dying... and now... now I begin to wish I won't survive the Blight...

Eamon looks at me as if he expects me to do something, say something when right now I don't even know which side is up.

I'm... I'm speechless.

In that suffocating silence, there's a sound... like someone sobbing.

"What was that?" Eamon walks over to the door that stands ajar. Together we peek out into the corridor. There's a movement I catch out of the corner of my eyes, but when I look there's nothing there. The corridor is as dark and empty as I feel.

"Perhaps the cat... or that mabari," Eamon mutters and shuts the door firmly. "All the things we talked about stay inside this room. Not a word to nobody. Especially not to Rori Cousland."

"You want me to lie to her..."
"I want you to act like a king."

I sigh, fist both hands into my hair and pull. As this doesn't help at all, I punch the wall until my knuckles bleed, crying out in furious frustration with each blow.

"Feeling any better?" Eamon asks when I sink to the floor.

"No," I mutter. I wish he would go away and stay away. I wish they all would leave me alone. Somehow Rori's idea of running away doesn't sound that impossible anymore.

A sharp knock at the door drags me out of my gloomy self-pity. Anora storms in, her face a mask of fury. Erlina follows behind, carrying a pair of shoes that got slobered all over. "Where is Cousland?" the queen demands to know.

"Shouldn't she be with you?" Eamon asks after a polite greeting.

"She left after she declared she'd rather support the archdemon at the Landsmeet," Anora hisses.

That much for Leliana's plan.

I am somewhat proud of my little spitfire...

At the same time, I panic. Anora becoming queen is my only chance to stay with Rori...

"That beast she calls a dog ruined my shoes!" Anora shrieks with Erlina holding up the corpus delicious?... corpus delicate?... corpus deli-whatever... oh, blast it, the exhibit behind the queen's back.

"Alistair and I were discussing a possible union of the Theirins and the Mac Tirs," Eamon says, completely ignoring the shoes but scowling at me when I snicker.

I take it, kings don't find it amusing when the dog of their possible future ex-lover gnaws on the shoes of their possible future wife...

That sounds so awfully wrong that it sobers me quite effectively.

"There's nothing to discuss because this so won't happen," I growl but like always nobody is listening to me. It's as if I wasn't there. Ain't I supposed to become king? Ain't people supposed to listen to their king? Obviously not when it's King Alistair the Fool!

"A marriage?" Anora scrutinizes me. Her eyes, they are somewhat always cold. There was a time when I admired her... It only took her a few hours to completely destroy the opinion I had about her and her abilities to lead this nation. "It would be like marrying Cailan's twin."

Okay, that's it! I'm out! I am not going to listen to this anymore. I don't give a fucking damn what Eamon thinks or what Anora thinks or if I am acting kingly. This is too much and I so do not want to hear anything about it anymore. I storm out of the study, ignoring Eamon's calls - and run straight into Rori around the next corner.

She's being violently sick into one of Isolde's vases - one of the few she hasn't yet broken in a fit of rage. All I can do is hold back her hair so that it doesn't get in the way. Her condition pretty much sums up what I think about that day.

"Have you talked to Wynne about being sick so often?" I ask once Rori is done and wipes her mouth clean with yet another of my handkerchiefs.
"When? I didn't even have time to eat since breakfast," Rori snaps. She doesn't take my hand when I hold it out to her to help her back to her feet but storms past me with me following behind crestfallenly. She even slams the door shut in my face on reaching our room - only to open it again a few minutes later with me still standing in the same position as I've not yet made up my mind what to do.

I feel awfully torn and not like Alistair at all. I feel used and manipulated and... Maker, can't we go back to slaying darkspawn?

Rori's eyes are all swollen and red, her cheeks smeared with dried tears. There's a look in her eyes, fierce and feisty - I very much doubt, Eamon could talk her into giving me up if it was the other way round. Rori'd simply tell him to go and fuck himself... I bet that's as rude as it sounds. Wynne shouted it at Caladrius and he turned bright red with anger.

And then Rori would find a way to secure the succession to the throne... if there was one at all, she'd find it. But we cannot know that, right? Could I risk the safety of a whole nation because of some vague hope?

Rori pulls me into the room, kicking the door shut, then shoving me against it. Next she's all over me, but it doesn't feel like the passion that normally drives us... She's pushing herself, the tension seeping into her actions... the urgency of her kisses, the way she roams her hands over my body and I over hers... it's desperate... as if we want to hold on to something that's slipping away...

"Ro-rori," I moan, stopping her for long enough to make her look at me. The fear in her eyes mirrors my own. Unlike me, she doesn't want to admit, though, we are defeated. "There's something you need to know..."

Can I tell her? I have to! I cannot just dump her when I become king like Eamon said... But would it change anything? What would she gain but the knowledge of the inevitable? Isn't it better to allow herself and me a few more days of happiness? Or is it just me being a coward?

"I love you," I finally blurt out the only truth I am still sure of. "Maker's Breath, I love you. Now and forever."

"I believe you," she says matter-of-factly.

That's what she says. Not 'I love you, too' or 'I like you well enough' or 'Well, I am loveable'. Nothing like that.

"Ahhh... you do?" I laugh nervously. "Without any proof? I don't have to pluck the stars out of the sky for you or a unique red rose growing in a terrible beast's garden? Nothing?"

Rori's expression softens as she smiles, tiptoeing to kiss the tip of my nose. "You are a good man, Alistair," she whispers, making me feel like the biggest ass that ever walked the face of Thedas. "Actually you are too good for your own good," she thoughtfully goes on. "While I am not as good as people want to believe. But that's good, for both your and my good."

I'd like to ask her what in the name of the Maker she's talking about, but she effectively silences me with a kiss. A good kiss. A gentle one full of warmth and love. One that seems so right, she makes me feel like floating. If not for the weight Eamon loaded onto my shoulders, she'd have me soaring to the sky.

Chapter End Notes
I never believed Alistair would get the heir-idea on his own. "They expect an heir," he says and 'they' somehow always was Eamon for me putting pressure on Alistair.
"Another Brick in the Wall"

"Alistair..."

"Hmph... mhm..."

"Alistair!"

"I'll... I'll be right there..."

"ALISTAIR!"

I bolt upright in bed, fumbling for my sword. I'm so sleepy, my eyes are puffed and everything around me is just a blurry mess. "Hm? Err... are we... are we under attack?" I stammer confusedly while the room I'm in slowly comes into focus.

"No. I've been thinking..."

No attack? I immediately let myself drop back onto the mattress and pull the pillow over my head. Actually absolutely nobody could mistake my actions for anything but me wanting to go back to sleep. Now.

"Alistair? Are you listening?"

"Huh?" I sigh when the pillow is lifted off my head. "Duh... Ro-rori...? How... how late is it?"

"Why not give her what she wants?"

"Give who what?" I yawn, blinking tiredly while I wait for my brain to start functioning. Morrigan would say, I could wait until the cows come home. And my cows for sure are night crawlers. I don't have no clue what Rori is talking about and honestly, I don't care. "It's... it's still dark outside!" I observe, unsuccessfully trying to stifle another yawn.

"I couldn't sleep. There's just too much going on, too much to think about." Rori sounds awfully awake. And a little tipsy.

"And you wake me because?" I groan, rolling over to bury my face in Rori's pillow. Hmmm, it smells faintly of verbena. That's the scent my favourite dreams are made off.

It's sometime in the middle of the night and I've been sleeping. Really sleeping... surprisingly well... without any nightmares... and no dog pushing me out of bed... on a comfortable mattress... without anybody trying to kill me... and it's all cozy... no rain, no snow, no freezing cold, no frying heat or blood sucking midgets...

"Anora wants to rule this kingdom, and I was thinking, why not?" Rori goes on, completely unperturbed by my lack of excitement. She for sure is giddy enough for both of us.

"Because you told her you'd rather crown the archdemon?" I mutter, watching her from half closed eyes. She's wearing one of my shirts and it has slipped off her shoulder. Her red curls bounce around her head as if they have developed a life of their own when she scrambles to kneel beside me in bed. She spills some of the wine from the glass she's holding over my head and flops my whole pillow onto my face to wipe me clean. "Hey! That's how you decide to support Anora? By suffocating me with a pillow?"
"So-sorry," Rori hiccups. She's so adorably cute, it's impossible to be mad at her. Or maybe I'm just too tired.

"You're drunk," I observe, more awake by now than I actually want to be.

"It works for Oghren. Why shouldn't it work for me?" Rori slurs cheerfully. "We're both small redheads after all."

"You have to be completely sloshed if you compare yourself to Oghren." I snatch the bottle from her before she can refill her glass and take a sip. I don't know much about wine, but I've drunken enough cheap booze to know this is none. "Did you break into Eamon's wine cellar?"

"Only emptied the bottles left over from dinner. Did I mention that I couldn't sleep?"

"You did. And that you've been thinking about Anora and her queenly qualities." Sleep gets overrated anyway, right? Who needs sleep when one can discuss politics and the future of a nation with one's drunken girlfriend in the middle of the night?

"Oh, yes, well, you know, that thought came suddenly while Shale and I were bricking up the door of her room..."

Pardon!? I almost choke on the wine.

"I think, I should be shocked and I probably should scold you..."

"Or spank me," Rori suggests dreamily.

"I really should!" I pout. According to the smile I earn, my woman thinks I am cute. I am not cute! Especially not when I am trying to be mad at her. "How could you just brick up Anora without me? Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I tried to wake you! But you mumbled in your sleep and pawed your nose and you looked so cute and peaceful..." Rori shrugs, offering a sheepish grin and a peck to my cheek. "And so..."

"And so you decided to have all the fun without me." I huff, crossing my arms in front of my chest. Smiling Rori climbs onto my lap and leans in to nuzzle my nose before she claims my lips for a soft kiss. She tastes of strawberries, cherries and a sunny summer's day... Mhmmm... maybe being woken in the middle of the night is not that bad at all...

"Wow," I breathe when we finally break the kiss. Rori's blue eyes glitter in the dim light of the candle as she grins impishly at me, obviously very proud of herself and the effect she has on me. Yes, she can so wrap me around her little finger - and that's just the way I like it. I know exactly what I'd like to do with her next... unfortunately Rori has something else on her mind.

"I'm starving," she mutters, scrambling out of bed rather ungracefully, putting some distance between us quickly. She's been like this ever since Fort Drakon and things that came natural before suddenly are awfully awkward. Rori tries but even she cannot smile everything away. I can't blame her but I also can't help the aching in my heart that comes with her wincing whenever I touch her body and that way remind her of that terrible night. "I'm going to be better," she declares when I hug her and she snuggles to me. "Soon. Real soon."

"Don't put pressure on yourself, Rori. I'm not planning to go anywhere."

"No, you don't," she whispers as she caresses my face. Her grim defiance softens, allowing the loving glow that surrounds her whenever she smiles at me to shine through.
All this time I still try to figure out if I should leave her oblivious about Eamon's plans. Can I just go on as if nothing ever happened? Just act as if everything was okay and avoid the trouble that's looming over me as long as possible... Yeah, that's just how I like to get things done, right? I'm just a coward afraid of decisions that I only make when I am cornered. Until that happens, I hope that the decision will be taken from me.

Rori and I together, it's not the way Eamon has it all planned out for us. The reasonable part of myself - and it's a rather tiny, neglected part - understands the necessity of securing the succession to the throne. The soldier part - and that's the one that thinks taking orders is easy... and somewhat sexy when it's this beautiful woman ordering me around - is giving me a lecture about duty and honour. And then there's the selfish part of Alistair, that part I've been pampering for a while on Rori's advice...

Maker, I really don't want to lose that girl!

I need a miracle.

I need Rori.

Desperately.

I follow Rori out of the room, taking another sip from the bottle she has brought with her while I hook one arm around her waist. She's swaying badly and keeps bumping into obstacles. A short way down the corridor we pass by Anora's room - and the recently erected wall. And it really is a rather solid wall, although the completion lacks the accuracy of a bricklayer's work. Rori and I spend a few minutes in companionable silence, admiring her and the golem's masterpiece.

"I really wish I could see Anora's expression when she opens her door in the morning and finds herself facing a wall," Rori giggles gleefully.

"Don't you think this is somewhat childish?" I wonder after we stood there, emptying the bottle of wine, and snickered for a while, imagining the look on Anora's face. Eamon so won't like this... I can already hear him lecture me about how to behave kingly...

"Of course it is," Rori admits without as much as a hint of remorse. Quite the contrary. She sounds and looks like the cat that swallowed the pigeon. Vengeful little beast.

Her spiteful mirth doesn't last, though. "This is not like the battles we fought before. Until now we could defend us with our blades. We were deciding about our fates... or at least I can tell myself that. Now, we are pawns in a game we do not control anymore..." She falls silent, frowning. "Maker, listen to me! I begin to sound like Eamon! Next I'm going to use words like duty, honour and responsibility in every sentence." She retrieves the bottle from me and throws it against the wall forcefully when she finds it's empty. "This is such a huge heap of... sodding nug-shit and pigeon crap, I can only try and make the best of it... It still all feels as if I'm caught in quick sand and the more I struggle the more I sink in," Rori hiccups in utter frustration.

Quick sand, yeah... She quite put it in a nutshell, didn't she?

"And what are you going to do about it?" I ask as I hug her tight again, hoping beyond hope that she'll come up with a brilliant masterplan. Would save me from using my own brains...

"I'm going to get drunk and have as much fun as I can possibly have," Rori declares defiantly before pulling me into a fierce kiss.

"Ahhh, I knew you'd have a plan," I grin.
When we enter the kitchen, it's empty but for Amethyne sleeping on the floor in front of the hearth with Barkley at her side. The girl wakes at our arrival since it's far from silent. Actually we stumble through the door, clinging to each other, kissing and giggling...

"Your Highness! Lady Rori!" the poor kid exclaims, scrambling to her feet. Rori and I jump apart and probably are as shocked as the girl. Duh, awkward... Amethyne is pressing her plush rabbit to her chest and looks downright scared. Someone has given her a new dress and it still looks like a rag. "Shall I call the servants?"

"No, no, we're just raiding the larder. We don't need any witnesses," I smile and wink at her. "Just a midnight snack, you know."

"I am going to get into trouble," Amethyne observes matter-of-factly when Rori returns from the larder with bacon, eggs and a loaf of bread. Barkley is right at her heels with a sausage ring locked between his teeth.

"Oh, no, just blame it all on us," I tell her assuringly but the elven kid just cocks her head to one side and regards me as if I was a complete retard.

"It doesn't matter," she then lectures me, sounding far older than she is and for sure much more disillusioned than a child her age should be. "They will still beat me for whatever you do."

"Oh," I say.

"Yes, oh," Amethyne repeats.

"I... I will protect you," I offer and this little girl tilts her head back, eyes me suspiciously and then she snorts. Ow! "Hey! I'm a prince, you know. I can give orders..." Now Rori is giggling and Amethyne gives me that look, one eyebrow raised, that I usually get from Morrigan when I make a stupid suggestion. "... I can give orders," I insist, trying my most menacing glare with Rori. She just grins. "People obeying is another story."

"They can't punish my personal handmaiden without my consent," Rori points out, waving the frying pan around. I hurry to disarm her. My cooking skills are... terrible. Rori's had Zevran wonder if she was trying to kill him. We actually don't let her cook anything. We don't even let her stir the soup anymore ever since she decided that Sten's cabbage soup needed some more salt and dropped a whole package of sugar into it. When you got the choice between starving slowly and Rori's cooking, I'd recommend the first.

"When did I become your handsmaiden, mylady?" Amethyne wants to know. She's not yet convinced.

"You just got promoted." Rori cheerfully smashes two eggs into the pan - shell included. "Oh, blast!" She dips her fingers into the already hot pan and tries to fish the shell out. "Ouch!"

"For real?" Amethyne - bless that girl - takes the eggs away from Rori and gently but firmly pushes her away from the pan. Then she glares at me until I leave her alone and stop giving cooking advices. Her frown follows us when we begin to lay the table for three.

"Okay, let me get this straight," I say, sounding rather huffed. "You believe Rori can protect you better than I could? This hurts my manly feelings, you know. White knights are there to protect the weak, like women and children..."

"I work for her. She has a reason to protect me," Amethyne points out as she drops the eggs and bacon onto our plates, leaving the third one empty. I practically have to wrestle the pan from her and
load some food onto her plate - that she only takes when Rori orders her to do so. Instead of sitting with us, Amethyne slumps down in front of the hearth again.

This... is so sad.

And wrong.

I've seen it happen a thousand times and more and never cared to wonder about how elves are treated in this society. Now I've opened my eyes, the injustice seems to jump into my face like everywhere.

"She really has learnt well, what it means to be an elf," Rori mutters, raising an eyebrow questioningly when I go to sit next to Amethyne. While the girl still stares at me slack-jawed, Rori comes to join us, too.

"You can't do that! You are nobles!" the girl protests.

"We are Grey Wardens," I correct her. "And Grey Wardens do not care about race. The darkspawn doesn't, so why should we?"

"Would you please stop acting silly!" Amethyne snaps, arms akimbo.

"Impossible!" I laugh. "We are silly!

"Actually I am silly and he is sillier... or was it the other way round?" Rori wonders.

"And together we are silliest." I explain. I want to point out here that I am rather tipsy at that very moment... That moment when I get the brilliant idea to stuff a sausage into each of my nostrils. I squint and drone: "I am the walrus goo goo g'joob g'goo goo g'joob."

Rori rolls around on the floor, laughing so hard she can hardly breathe.

"You are adults," Amethyne reminds us sternly.

"We are? When did that happen?" I wonder, pulling the sausages out of my nose and feeding them to a happily barking dog.

Sighing, Amethyne rolls her eyes at us, before returning to the table, where we finally all can sit down and have our midnight snack. "Could you at least try to behave now?" the seven year old scolds us.

We do try.

"Soooo.... about that brilliant inspiration you had when you bricks up Anora in her room...?" I ask to break the silence when it becomes kinda awkward and it proves impossible to drown it in wine.

"Oh yes, well, you know, when all this is over...," Rori says, waving her fork around as she talks. "Just in case we really do defeat the archdemon, then there's Ferelden all destroyed by the darkspawn, corruption everywhere and refugees who have lost their homes, a famine for sure and death and despair... and everybody will look at the monarch and go: Fix it! Now! And they will grow impatient and blame their misfortune on whoever occupies the throne... Really, one has to be completely insane to actually want to become king or queen now!"

"Now you mention it..."

"And then there's the nobles...," Rori goes on, pulling a face. "If you think, they're all going to be like Yes, we can! and unite for the sake of the kingdom and the people, then you really don't know
"the Fereldan nobility..."

"At least it won't get boring."

"It will be a constant and everlasting struggle for the leader of this nation to make them work together. They will be greedy and selfish and they will begrudge each other the very air they are breathing..." Rori explains in between stuffing herself with eggs and bacon. "Papa used to say it's easier to herd cats than to make Fereldan nobles agree on anything."

"Really, I so can't wait to become king!"

Actually I was a little miffed when Rori mentioned earlier that Anora should become queen. For months now she pushed me through a campaign and tried to turn me into someone I am not. And let's face the truth, no matter what Rori, Leliana or Zevran think or say, I am no king material. What actually got me to accept I should become king is the fact that neither Anora nor Loghain have a conscience... I may be an idiot but at least I am a kindhearted idiot.

"So, you want to support Anora now?" I sigh, tired of all the to and fro. My head is spinning. Could be the confusing and stressful mess I'm in. Could be the booze. I am really rather tipsy by now but some more wine won't hurt. I don't know about Amethyne's qualities as a handmaiden but she for sure is a damn good cupbearer. Like every other elf I've ever met the girl is incredibly good at making herself invisible. She moves silently and melts with the shadows. With her glowing eyes, like a cat's, she watches and she listens and is there when you need her. It's almost creepy, now I think about it. I mean, all those elves out there, they probably know more secrets than anybody else in Thedas because they are always there without being noticed.

"What? Never!" Rori snorts the wine out of her nose at my question.

"But you said... I'm confused... and don't you pinch my cheek!" I swat at her hand when she tries to touch me. "You've spent far too much time with Leliana. Is this some bardly plan?"

"I don't want to pinch you! You got egg smeared all over your cheek," Rori hiccups. Then she licks her thumb and scrubs my face like mothers do with their toddlers. I grimace and stick my tongue out at her.

"So about Anora?" I make another attempt of finding out what's going on in my woman's drunken mind.

"I think... I think I am going to improvise," Rori slurs with inebriate confidence. She's forming a cat's face on her plate with toast triangles as ears, fried eggs as eyes, a bacon mouth and sausage whiskers sticking out from a fried tomato nose. Beaming from ear to ear she presents it to me.

"Improvise?" I echo. "Bloody blast it, Rori! The future of the whole kingdom, my future, yours... is at stake... and your idea of dealing with all that is improvisation?"

Munching on the sausage whiskers, cheeks puffed like a chipmunk's, Rori nods.

I blink. I blink again. Then I burst into laughter. "Good on you!" Shit happens - at least that's what Oghren says. And it always lands on top of your head - according to Shale's law. We've been dealing with a whole lot of different shit ever since Ostagar - and we never had a strategy because whatever plan we made - it never turned out the way we thought. Rori is a bloody blasted expert in improvisation.

I feel much better now.
Really, I do.

"But first I have to go shopping. I need some new bras," Rori sighs. "My boobs are killing me. I feel like toppling over with that weight."

"Yeah, let's not forget the real important things," I laugh. "One has to prioritise."

"Yup," Rori agrees. "Can't possibly get this whole mess fixed when I'm distracted by my boobs all the time."

I so know what she means. Her bosom indeed is highly distracting.

"What about Ignacio and this last job he wants us to do? Or the nobles we still have to convince?"

"Alistair, they are nobles. Most of them won't get up before midday. And I'm not going to spend the whole day in that lingerie shop! Unless Leliana comes along. Then we won't get out of there before closing time."

"We? You don't want me to come with you, do you?" I laugh nervously and blush. "Into a lingerie store... where there's women's... undergarment and things... and... That's not a man's place, you know..."

"You rather have me take Zevran along and help me choose something pretty?"

"No!" Extortionary little beast!

"Thought so." Rori smiles ever so sweetly at me. "I also think we made a deal a while ago... and it was about a corset..."

"If you are talking about the earthworm disaster, forget it!" I snap.

That's when Amethyne decides to give up her invisibility: "Earthworm?" she blurts out curiously and only now Rori and I realize the girl has witnessed our conversation.

"Errr..." I stammer while Rori, having turned a brighter shade of pink, mutters: "Very funny animals... poking their heads out of... uhm... never mind..." Then we both reach for our goblets at the same time and down whatever is in there.

Amethyne looks from Rori to me, sighs heavily, rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

Yeah, we got that effect on people.
"Anora is not amused," Amethyne informs me when she sails into our bedroom sometime around... duh, I don't know... the sun is shining... and it's bright... too bright... Anyway, the elven kid carries a tray loaded with a morning after breakfast...

"Bless you, Amy," I mutter when the girl hands me a cup of strong black tea.

"You should expect her here as soon as the golem has broken down the wall."

"Huh? Who?"

"Anora," Amethyne says patiently in that tone Wynne uses on me when I'm completely at a loss. She butters a slice of toast, slaps marmelade on it and shoves it into my hand.

"Duh," is all I manage as a reply while I munch on my toast. Meanwhile the elfling tries to revive Rori. Lying prone, she occupies most of the bed, drools onto her pillow and snores softly. Cute.

I don't really know when Rori and I returned to our bedroom last night. Or was it morning? I do remember that Amethyne tucked me into bed after pulling off my boots and commenting on the condition of my socks. And I recall that this happened after she shushed Rori and me all the way to our bedroom since we roared The Soldier and the Sea Wolf on top of our voices.

Boy, we were so pickled, I don't even know how we managed to get to our bedroom at all. Grunting, Rori next to me props herself up on her elbows and confusedly blinks at her handmaiden. She yawns and stretches like a cat, having that tangled ball of red hair sticking out of her head bounce around as if it has come alive. Her hangover has to be as bad as mine, maybe even worse. Still she grins like a naughty little imp as soon as Amy delivers the news to her. "Discovered the bricked up door, didn't she? Hihihihii! Owww... you couldn't ask Wynne for a potion against a splitting headache, could you, Amy? Please?"

Wordlessly Amy pulls two vials from the pocket of her apron, handing one to Rori and one to me. "You really shouldn't drink that much," she scolds us.

"Yes, ma'am," Rori and I mutter compunctiously.

This girl is creepy.

"The golem says, it will take at least an hour to set Anora free," Amethyne informs us. Rori snorts her tea out of her nose and I almost choke on mine. We both have seen Shale tear down walls like this with one single handed punch. Usually Rori hasn't even finished the sentence "Shale, could you please..." and the wall is already gone.

Maker, I love that walking talking statue!

"One hour?" Rori giggles once Amy has left. "What does she do? Scratch the mortar out with a toothpick?"

"Do you want to go and see?"

Rori wags her head from side to side, considering the pros and cons of leaving the bed. "No," she finally decides and although I am curious I so can't complain since she snuggles to me, smiling
brightly. Next she steals kisses from me, nipping at my lower lip teasingly.

Hmmmm... this can't be that bad a day if it starts with Rori and me in bed together, eager to coax each other out of our clothes. I somewhat thought this would all be slow and we would go easy on each other. I don't want to push Rori to do anything she isn't ready for. She, however, seems to be determined to make good use of that hour before Anora is set free to bother us again.

"Are... are you sure?" I mutter breathlessly when I actually get the chance to say something at all before she sucks my tongue into her mouth again.

"Yes, I'm sure. Never been as sure as right now. Well, maybe back when..." This time it's me to silence her.

And that's how I get rid of my pants and smallclothes real fast, pulled down and tossed aside by Rori rather unceremoniously. She'd make short work of my shirt, too, but first... I have to pee.

It's not that easy to convince Rori to let go of me. She's all over me, tearing at my shirt, and I only reluctantly throw her off when she climbs on top of me.

"Don't go away, I'll be right there," I mutter, hurrying to disappear behind the screen to answer the call of nature while my woman stays in bed and pouts.

"Hurry up!"

"Woman, really, you can wait for a minute or two, can't you?"

"No! I need a real man and his... iron-hard tumescence - now."

"His what!?" I laugh and almost miss the chamber pot.

Rori giggles all bashfully and girlishly. "Your engorged member, swollen staff or whatever you want to call it. I need it. Or more like, the door of my womanhood needs it. Desperately. Now."

"Rori, has Zev been talking to you again? Or... Oghren?" I ask suspiciously. I am standing here with my whatever she wants to call it in hand and have this weird and somewhat awkward conversation. How can she say all those things without blushing... okay, considering all the giggling, she's probably flushed from head to toe.

"I've borrowed one of those romance novels Wynne likes to read."

"Wynne reads about... engorged members?" I croak. "That sounds somewhat... painful... and... Maker! She's... she's old! She's like my granny! How can she read about such things!?"

"She puts on her reading glasses, opens the book and concentrates on the letters, I guess."

"You're doing this on purpose," I complain as I emerge from behind the screen - and freeze.

Maker's Breath!

My ginger is sprawled across the bed with her legs parted. She's not wearing a single piece of clothing and, watching me intently from her large blue eyes, she sucks at her index finger, then circles it around her rosy nipple. "What are you waiting for?" she purrs, flushing a brighter shade of pink at the very same time. Then she grins sheepishly. "This is silly, isn't it?"

Shaking my head, I stand there, wearing nothing but my shirt and my socks, and gawk foolishly. I think I also drool. But only a little bit.
"Alistair? I really begin to feel stupid, you know," Rori complains as she repeats the ministration with her second nipple.

"You got that from the romance novel? Maker, I should read more..."

"Yes, and you should be totally turned on..."

"I am. Really. Totally. Engorged and swollen and iron-hard." I lift the hem of my shirt to show her.

"I think you meet all the requirements," Rori grins.

"Now, ain't I lucky... wait, what does that say about Wynne when I meet the requirements of... ew... EW!"

"Alistair!" Rori claps her hands to regain my attention. "You are supposed to act sexy now."

"That's a piece of cake! Prepare for the sexiest man alive in action," I laugh. Standing with my back towards her, I sway my hips, wiggle my ass at her and slowly begin to lift the hem of my shirt with one hand, smacking my other down on my buttocks. All the while I sing: "I'm too sexy for my shirt, too sexy for my shirt, so sexy it hurts!"

"Al-al-alistair!" Rori howls with laughter. She tries not to, even bites her pillow to stifle it, but she has no chance. I can see my own reflection in the mirror and I so can't blame her. My iron-hard tumescence is bouncing up and down while I dance... and I look anything but sexy. I wiggle my eyebrows at my grinning reflection and lunge into the crescendo of my performance.

"I'm your lover, you know what I mean, and I do my sexy show in your bedroom, yeah, in your bedroom, in your bedroom, yeah, I do my sexy show in your bedroom..." Pirouetting, I rip the shirt open, flinging it into the corner of the room...

And that's the very moment when the door is slammed open and I just got enough time to dive behind the screen for cover. Rori yelps and pulls the blanket over her head, rolling out of bed on the side farthest away from the door.

"Lady Cousland," Anora begins sternly. I really don't know if she hasn't seen anything at all or just pretends she hasn't seen anything at all. I do hope it's the first or I am going to die a very slow and painful death of mortified embarrassment. "I do hope you rested well - despite your nightly activities." Rori snickers and Anora scowls at her. "There's some things I have to talk to you about..."

"Can't you fucking knock!?" Rori returns the greeting. She still seeks cover behind the bed, clutching the blanket to her chest.

"I knew your family. Eleanor in particular was dear to me - and she believed in you as did your father," Anora goes on as if Rori had said nothing at all. "What Howe did was unforgiveable. How fitting he died at your hand."

"Yes, awesome," Rori grunts as she lifts herself off the floor, wrapped in the blanket to cover her nakedness. With her head held up high she for sure has as much dignity as a woman can have who tries to shove her panties under the bed with her foot while pretending she is only having a conversation and nothing else. "What do you want, Anora? Spit it out! I got more important things to do."

"I will be blunt," Anora says, unshocked by the fact that Rori hit her big toe at the bed while
attempting to hide her underwear and now, cursing under her breath, is hopping around on one foot. That's not that easy when you also got to keep a blanket from slipping. "I can see that your voice will be a strong one in days to come. You are the Teyrna of Highever, though not by title or acknowledgement through my father, many nobles will regard you as Bryce Cousland's rightful heir. It is to you that Eamon and Angus listen, and with good reason."

The way Rori stares at Anora, she's pondering if the queen has lost her mind. "Eamon? Listening to me? When did that happen?"

"My father must be stopped," Anora declares. She starts pacing the room - and stops when she comes across my small clothes. One raised eyebrow is all that indicates she is taking notice of the scattered clothes, the rumpled sheets and the lack of proper clothing on Rori. "But once that is done, Ferelden will need a ruler. I would welcome your support for my throne."

"Maker! Not again!" Rori groans, rolling her eyes. She lets herself drop face forward onto the bed when Anora stays all calm and just continues with her Anora-for-Queen-campaign.

"For years I have ruled this kingdom as Cailan's queen. As much as they loved Cailan, all of the Bannorn knew this to be so. Cailan was a good man. But what is needed now is not another good man but a good ruler," Anora explains matter-of-factly.

"What part about me saying no is that hard to understand?" Rori mutters in exasperation.

"I believe it's you who doesn't understand," Anora lectures the younger woman. "I sent Erlina here not solely because I thought I needed help, but because I saw an opportunity for us both. I need your support and you need mine."

"I already saw how you support me. Thank you very much! I am not interested in any more of your supportive support," Rori snaps furiously, lifting her head from the bed to glare daggers at the other woman.

"You shouldn't forget that we are talking about Ferelden's future, not about yours," Anora remarks, sounding as if she was teaching a retard how to use a spoon. "It is time to grow up. Time to act like the person people believe you to be. Time to make the right decision for Ferelden."

Rori snorts noisily same time as I do, causing Anora to turn around, frowning at the screen where I'm still hiding. She doesn't know, I am here. Ha! Wonderful! Means she hasn't seen me naked but for my socks!

"What do you think of Alistair's potential to rule, never mind his willingness?" Anora suddenly asks, catching Rori by surprise. My beloved fellow Grey Warden freezes, boot in hand that she clearly has only picked up for one reason: to throw it at Anora.

"He is stronger and wiser than anybody including himself wants to believe."

Awww. That's sweet. And so not true. I'm just... Maker, most of the time I feel as if I don't know myself. Perhaps I have never known who I am. I always lived with my head in the clouds, dreaming of who I want to be but never having the courage to leave the path I was made to follow by other people's decisions. I accepted my fate because it was my duty - but also my lack of courage to actually decide for myself. I also hardly knew what to do with my life. And now they really want to make me king. That's quite a joke, don't you think?

"Alistair seems like a kind, well-meaning man and biddable enough," Anora observes, hurrying on when a very sour faced Rori lifts the boot once more. "These are admirable qualities, if not kingly
Biddable? Well, yes, I guess, I am. That's probably why everybody talks about me becoming king without ever asking for my opinion. At least Anora never discussed that matter with me. Instead she turns to Rori, hoping she is going to tell biddable Alistair what he's supposed to do. There's just one thing she obviously never took into consideration: Rori for sure is not biddable. I very much doubt that word even exists in her vocabulary. So at this very moment, she doesn't biddably nod to everything Anora says. Quite the contrary.

"He also seems to be a fine Grey Warden - which is actually why he should remain one, and serve the kingdom by defeating the darkspawn," Anora goes on, rather unimpressed by Rori's by now seething temper.

"You don't freaking know him! You talked to him for how long? Five minutes? And that makes you think, you can judge him?" Rori hisses.

"Cailan knew about Alistair. He collected any information he could get about his half-brother. And whatever Cailan knew, he shared with me. It was Arl Eamon that kept Alistair out of the courts, as Maric had desired. But that couldn't keep his existence a secret."

Wide eyed, Rori stares at Anora. "Cailan knew? But... Maker! That means... he sought to protect him!"

"What are you talking about?" Anora demands to know.

Yeah, I'd like to know that, too. My brother... he was kinda looking after me all this time. That's what Anora is saying, isn't she? I mean, it's not that he checked out if I was a potential threat, right? Right? Not when what Rori says is true...

I lie there on the ground, naked but for my socks, and have all fuzzy brotherly feelings about a man I hardly knew. He cared... well, not obviously, but he did. I wish, I had known him better, that there had been a chance to talk to him... But he's dead. It makes me want to cry.

"So all your knowledge about Alistair and his character, you got it from tales and the information Cailan collected. Awesome! Of course you wouldn't have to talk to him then to get to know him in person," Rori says icily, ignoring the queen's question.

"Let's stay realistic," Anora says. "There are some who would follow Alistair out of respect of his Theirin blood. The others would see this as Eamon grabbing for power. Who else do you think Alistair would turn to for help? Eventually the nobility would return to the old days of constant warring with each other. Alistair's weakness would destroy everything Maric built."

"But you of course can make it better," Rori snorts. "And you don't need anybody's help to do so because you are so very awesome, the sun shines right out of your wannabe royal ass!"

"Language," I mutter under my breath to myself and then hurry to bite my hand until I taste blood to stifle my laughter. Maker! If Anora doesn't leave soon I am going to burst.

"I believe that I am what this country needs. And I will fight for what I believe," Anora declares with her head held high. Agreed, she doesn't give up easily. I would have already left Rori alone. It's quite obvious she's not going to side with Anora. It's probably not the wisest decision, especially if she still considers her drunken ideas from last night to help Anora claim the throne and leave her alone with all the mess. But the way she looks, she would explode if she tried to suppress her anger and contempt for this woman. "Would Alistair do the same?" Anora demands to know.
"Blast yes, he would!" Rori shouts, finally throwing the boot. It crashes into the door right behind Anora. The queen flinches but doesn't back away. "He has fought for what he believes ever since Ostagar, raising an army to defend Ferelden while you allowed your father to take the power away from you and start a civil war!"

Anora still doesn't get she is not going to win Rori over. "Supporting me you will be seen as supporting the interest of Ferelden as opposed to solely those of the Grey Wardens and Eamon."

For a moment it seems as if Rori was about to lunge at Anora across the bed and beat the pigeon crap out of her. Inhaling deeply, she - with some effort - manages to control herself and when she finally talks, her voice is dangerously calm. "You know, I have the feeling, no matter what I do, if I supported you or not, you'd backstab me anyway. And now don't give me shit about how your reign would be the best for Ferelden. This is not about Ferelden, this is about Anora who has made her ass comfortable on the throne and doesn't want to give it up."

"So you're going to go on with these childish pranks like brickling up my door?"

"That was the most entertaining event ever since I went to rescue you from Howe."

"You are making a mistake..."

"No, it's you making the mistake if you believe Alistair or me to be nothing but puppets to be used and manipulated."

"You seem to forget that at this very moment you neither have a title nor a teyrnir to rule and that your power is borrowed from both the legend surrounding your parents and the respect they have earn..."

"Get out! Now!"

Anora slowly nods, turning towards the door. With her hand on the knob, she one last time takes a look around the room. "Maric's boys are charming, aren't they? And happiest when they can dote upon a woman. That's what keeps you at Alistair's side, isn't it? Perhaps it's not alone Eamon grabbing for power but you, too."

"Biddable? Dote upon?" Rori begins, her face a mask of fury and contempt. "Now I do understand why Cailan planned to divor...." Before she can finish her sentence, she claps her hands over her mouth to stop herself.

"What did Cailan plan?" Anora asks suspiciously.

"Nevermind," Rori mutters and her expression softens for a moment. "You loved Cailan, didn't you? In your very own way, you loved him. Well, I love Alistair, if that's what you want to know. The difference between us, Anora, is that I believe in the man I love instead of regarding him as a lovable but useless fool."

I have to crane my neck uncomfortably to get a better look at Anora - I wish I hadn't made the effort. Her expression is so cold and calculating, it makes me shiver. Okay, maybe it's me lying on the cold stone floor for a while now that causes the shivering... but that doesn't make Anora's glare any more pleasant. "I was hoping you would be more like your mother, a woman who would put Ferelden first and not her own petty desires..."

I believe, she would have said more but that's when Rori grabs Wynne's rather thick romance novel from the bedside table and hauls it at Anora. That makes the queen's exit a little more hurried and less dignified than she certainly planned.
"She really has a nasty glare," I sigh when I lift myself from the floor. Blast it! I am sick and tired of being pushed around like a pawn. And I am sick and tired of being seen as kindhearted but foolish, as someone expendable when not useful anymore. "She wants to be queen. I get it. I don't trust her more than her father. But I get it. People say Anora is smart, determined..."

"Blast, yes, she is," Rori groans, flopping down on the bed. "The nicest thing I can say about her: She's her father's daughter. Don't get me started on the not so nice things or you'll have to listen to my rant for the next few days."

"I say that's where the problem lies," I growl, punching my fist at my palm. "People like her and her father always think they're the only ones who can fix things. So everyone should just stay out of their way." Rori grins proudly at me. "What? Oh, come on! I'm not kingly! I wear nothing but my filthy socks!"

"Kingliness got nothing to do with the clothes you wear or don't wear. I still think you'd make a fine king."

"You say that now. Just wait, I'm full of surprises," I laugh, winking at her. After her encounter with Anora, will Rori still consider helping her to stay on the throne like she said yesterday - when she was awfully tipsy? I don't even want to think about what Eamon said, not when I am here all naked and she is here all naked...

But that's when Rori jumps out of bed and hurries to clean herself and put on clean clothes.

"What about your desperate need for the iron-hard tumescence?" I pout while she brushes her teeth.

"It has to wait," Rori mumbles, toothbrush in mouth. "First we have to convince a bunch of nobles to support us at the Landsmeet."

"They won't run away, will they?" I sulk when Rori throws a clean shirt at me - that I do not catch because I really don't see why we shouldn't stay in bed for a little longer. This is all Anora's fault. I didn't think it was possible to like her even less, but she proves me wrong over and over again.

"It can't hurt to be able to control the whole game even without Anora's support," Rori mutters, putting on her boots. "She's not as powerful as she wants us to believe. Loghain is in control, not Anora. That makes her appear weak and no more than her father's puppet."

I still stand there in no more than my socks and try to look as pitiful as possible. Unfortunately Rori is too busy with the tangled mess on her head to notice my puppy-dog-eyes.

"In case she gets her throne, I want her to know the Grey Wardens are the ones who put her there with the backup of the Ferelden nobility - the Warden's backup, not hers," Rori goes on, checking her weapons before she straps them to her back. "She better not even get the idea to fuck with us..."

"Talking about fucking..."

"In case it's you becoming king, I want the nobility to unite in loyalty for their new king." Rori turns to me, noticing for the first time I haven't moved an inch. "Don't you want to get dressed? You're certainly impressive that way but..."

"I take it I will have to act kingly?" I interrupt her.

"Yep."

"In that case, Lady Rori, move your pretty little ass back into bed," I order with as much kingliness I
can actually manage. "That's a command," I add just in case it didn't sound like one or I didn't sound like it. I wiggle my eyebrows at her and present my best boyishly charming lopsided grin. That always works with Rori. Well, almost always. Most of the time... kinda... "I want to introduce you to another royal member..."

"More like royal jelly at the moment," Rori giggles, ogling my manhood.

Ow!

Ouch!

"You really have a way to boost a man's self-esteem, kitten," I mutter.
"Yes, I can. Yes, I CAN. YES, I CAN! ... Blast... I so can't!... Maker! I am doomed!" I am standing in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection that is staring back with increasing panic, while Amy polishes the last few fingerprints of my shining armour - the one I wore when arriving at Denerim with the Mac Eanraig armada. "Am I the only one who feels as if they are lead like a lamb to the slaughter?"

"Bah!" Rori bleats as she emerges from behind the screen where she has been violently sick into the chamber pot. She claims its the stress and her nerves. Can't blame her, I feel terribly sick myself.

"You've fought against darkspawn and demons and mages. Now you only will go to the Landsmeet with all the nobility of Ferelden - that can't be that dangerous, can it?" Amethyne asks for once sounding like the child she is.

The Maker has already proven a whole lot of times that HE has a very strange sense of humour - so I wouldn't be surprised if I was king at the end of the day. Or, haha, imagine that: Loghain becomes a Grey Warden, Anora gets her throne and I get executed so they can get rid of the fool who tried to take their power away for good... What a joke!

"I'd rather meet the archdemon," I mutter, frowning at my reflection as I fumble around with my hair. There's this one strand that just won't stay where it's supposed to be... and as I actually consider my decapitation, I at least want my head to look as pretty as possible...

"You already said that when I dragged you into the Gnawed Noble, and here you are, alive and still kicking," Rori teases me and ruffles my hair just when it's perfect.

"Hardly," I complain, glaring daggers at her. "It is where the nobility goes to get drunk and debate who is the most self-important of them all," I explain to Amy, waving the comb around. "Good times." Rori snatches the comb from me and runs it through her thick curls - and of course she breaks off a tooth. "Hey! This is my favourite comb!" I growl when she hands it back to me with an apologetical shrug and a sheepish grin.

"Oh, come on! Uncle Angus' spectacle of replaying the naval battle of Denerim inside the tavern with tables as ships, being shoved around, and a whole lot of very tipsy nobles fencing with whatever they could get hold of wasn't that bad."

"Oghren raised his smallclothes as the Orlesian flag after Zevran drew a lion on it...," I snicker.

"The stench was unbearable," Rori groans.

"Leonas Bryland confirmed that's exactly what Orlesians smell like..." And that's about all I remember from the conversation I had with the bann. And that his daughter threw a major tantrum when Rori told her that Shale wasn't for sale.

"And there was a big hooray when Shale shoved an Orlesian table-ship so hard, it crashed into the wall and immediately sunk... with bard and nug on board," Rori cheers.

"But I had to play Maric and everybody and their dog drunkenly slapped my back afterwards, slurring to me how much I ressembled my father," I pout.
"You have to admit, that's not the worst thing they could have said about you," Rori points out, tiptoeing to give me a peck on the cheek.

"Old ladies kept groping my hindquarters," I complain. It's especially bitter since that is about how close I got to have sex ever since Rori dragged me out of this bedroom after her verbal rumble with Anora. "And they said... they said..." One look at Amethyne curiously following our conversation and I blush a deeper shade of crimson. Even my ears glow. "Maker! I can't repeat that..."

"At least nobody offered you coin. Morrigan was mistaken for a... uhm... err..." Rori casts a glance at Amethyne and grins sheepishly. "She was mistaken for...

"A whore," the elven girl prompts.

"HA! Yes!" I snicker. "That was almost worth all the talking to the nobles."

"You did well," Rori assures me.

"Really? I only remember I had to sing the Soldier and the Seawolf until my throat was sore and drink a toast to... duh, I really don't know anymore... In the end I just downed every shot Angus shoved into my hand."

"Ugh, don't talk about drinks... I had to hide under Sten's table with Barkley..."

"Oh, hiding you call it? I thought, you passed out."

"I was hiding," Rori insists, clonking her knuckles against my chest plate. "Cousin James kept drinking toasts on my dead parents. And as much as I loved them, I cannot toast on them a dozen times in a row..."

"James? Wasn't that the fool who accepted Shale's challenge to arm-wrestle her?" I pull a face at the memory of what the arm looked like after arm-wrestling the golem and before a very tipsy granny mage mended it back together.

"Yep. But at least he placed his bet on the golem."

"As far as I recall, James also kept hitting on Leliana..."

"Until Leliana hit him," Rori laughs. "Over the head. With a frying pan. And there they say Orlesian bards are subtle."

"Sten really was the only one who stayed sober - well, and Shale," I observe, wondering how he actually endured it. He's such a tough guy. "He kept saying things like: 'Very innovative, making a place for idiots to gather where they won't be underfoot.' He probably has the Qunari invasion all planned out already."

"Do you think, Wynne recalls how she got engaged?" Rori wonders.

"Very unlikely," I mutter, rubbing my right buttock where under the shiny armour there is now a griffon painting, somewhat like the designs Zevran wears on his face. What does he call them? Tatoos? Don't ask me how it got there! I have no blasted clue! All I know, I woke up with it this morning. Rori got a matching one on her left buttock. She is as clueless as I am. Just one thing is sure: At some point we both dropped our pants - unless of course there is magic involved... oh, please, let there be magic involved... At least the unsolved mystery of the griffon adorning my hindquarters keeps me from thinking too much about how I could be king when I return... if I return... and what that means for Rori and me... Oh, blast it! "I so could do with a drink..."
"Ugh," Rori groans and claps her hands over her mouth.

"You two really should drink less," Amy says while she brushes off Rori's midnight blue cape with the silver griffon and the laurel wreath. "Here," she hands me my shield - formerly Duncan's - and my sword - formerly Maric's. "Try not to get drunk this time."

"How about: try not to get killed?" I mumble when Amethyne shoos Rori and me out of the door.

"I take it you got at least that much common sense," the seven year old remarks dryly.

She's such a funny little kid.

"Alistair, Rori," Eamon exclaims when we almost run straight into him as soon as we stumble out of the door. "Anora has disappeared!"

"That wouldn't have happened if you had left the bricked up door bricked up," Rori says gloomily.

"She is gone? Hopefully for good!" I cheer.

"I can't share your optimism. She for sure is up to something. I wish you could have convinced her to become your ally," Eamon sighs. The last few weeks have been stressful for him, too. He looks as tired and old as I feel.

"Anora didn't want to be my ally. She wanted me to be hers." Rori says.

"Well, we can't undo this anymore. This is our one and only chance. May the Maker guide us and show mercy. Today our fate and that of Ferelden will be decided. I'll meet you at the Landsmeet. Don't be late!" Thus said the Arl of Redcliffe marches off.

I look at Rori, Rori looks at me and we both bleat: "BAH!"

Only half an hour later, the little lambs meet the big bad wolf. Actually it's Loghain's über-bully Ser Cauthrien, trying to murder me - and Rori and the whole rest of the flock - right outside the doors of the great hall where the Landsmeet is supposed to take place. One so can't blame Loghain of lack of determination.

"Warden, I am not surprised it has come to this," Cauthrien declares. We practically stumble upon her as soon as we walk through the door. And there I was wondering why there weren't any guards anywhere. Well, here they are! Wolves like sheep seldomly come alone.

"Oh no," Rori groans. "Not again! Don't you have anything else to do? This is getting old, all the attempts to murder us. That's so uncool."

"And unprofessional," Zevran adds cheerfully. "Doesn't anybody anymore know how to create a decent ambush?"

"She wants to fight us? But we all got dressed up so lovely, armours polished, hair looking nice," I sigh heavily. And there I promised Amethyne not to completely ruin my garments this time.

Oghren grunts, inching away from me. "Lad, you sound like a sodding queen!"

"And there I thought I was supposed to be king," I laugh. "No wonder Anora is so furious. I'd certainly also look better in her dresses..."

At the sound of my voice, Cauthrien whips around to face me. She's quite aggressive, stance, tone of her voice. This is no freaking game, she means it. "And Alistair, if you were even remotely worthy
of being King Maric's son you would already be in the Landsmeet, now wouldn't you?"

Whoa!

I take it, Cauthrien is not my biggest fan. She probably expects me to feel insulted now. Sorry, I've heard worse from Morrigan. Maybe she should take lessons with her.

"I certainly would if you didn't block my way," I shoot back before Rori can haul an insult at her. My beloved fellow Grey Warden stands right next to me with her fists clenched and gritted teeth, her face so bright red, she looks as if she was about to explode.

"You have torn Ferelden apart to oppose the very man who ensured you were born into freedom," Cauthrien snaps, pointing her finger first at Rori then at me.

Rori inhales deeply, then sighs heavily. "We wouldn't oppose him if he didn't constantly try to kill us. Like right now. Or our families, friends, a whole lot of completely innocent people... And as for the civil war, it started long before we even started opposing him..."

"You do not think you will get past me to denigrate the Landsmeet itself," Loghain's watch dog cuts her short before she can even try to explain.

Rori and I shake our heads. "Nope, we wouldn't even dare to dream of that," I mutter. "I mean, you and the whole gang of heavily armed guards quite obviously aren't here to wish us luck. I'm not an idiot... well, not all of the time. Just, you know, this time we have quite some backup ourselves..."

"The nobles of Ferelden will confirm my lord as regent and we can finally put this to rest once you are gone," Cauthrien shouts, taking one step back, her face a grim mask of determination, her hand reaching for her sword.

"Does that mean we are going to crush its head now?" Shale asks hopefully, punching her fist into her palm.

Rori shakes her head silently and takes one step forward while the rest of her companions all take one step back and prepare for battle.

"Err... Rori? Wrong way?" I hiss, ready to slam my shield into the female knight should she make a move towards Rori.

"You crazy nug-cuddler, what the fuck do you think you're doing?" Oghren grunts, axe raised.

Holding up her hand to stop Shale and the rest of us from lunging into battle, Rori takes another step forward. Her eyes locked with Ser Cauthrien's, she refuses to be intimidated by the knight - who certainly will have to listen to some things she won't like. Rori has that look on her face, the same she wore when challenging Howe for a duel.

"Ser Cauthrien, I'd rather not fight against you. You are a loyal and honourable knight - you have proven so when you could have just walked away and let things happen," Rori says lowly, her voice trembles from the effort to keep it calm and her emotions reined in. "Loghain used to be a great and noble man, perhaps he still is."

I disagree but even I am smart enough to keep my mouth shut for once. Rori is right, Cauthrien could have walked away, back then in Fort Drakon... but she didn't. She indeed is an honourable woman, though the man she serves is not.

Err... honourable, I mean. Loghain of course is not a woman... So why am I having images of him in
a fancy dress popping up in my mind right now. It's so hilarious, I have to clap both my hands over my mouth to stop myself from laughing out loud.

"But his actions are far from great or noble," Rori goes on. "They include murder, slavery and treachery. I am sure, he believes to defend Ferelden that way - quite the contrary, though. He sees a foe where there is none and is blind for the real threat."

Ser Cauthrien lifts her sword, ready to strike and still Rori doesn't move an inch. The sword in the knight's hand trembles slightly as she bites her lips to stop them from quivering. She shakes her head furiously, tightens the grip around her sword.

"If you truly believe with all your heart that what Loghain does, is right, then you should fight us," Rori says in a soft whisper, not even blinking when Cauthrien whirls her blade around, pointing it at Rori's throat.

Maker! She's giving me a heart attack! Zevran beside me curses in Antivan under his breath, I can feel the crackling of magic in my back and hear Leliana whispering prayers. Shale gnaws at her non-existent fingernails and Oghren is downing his whole flask in one go - well, he would if Wynne didn't snatch it away from him to take a sip herself. Only Sten stays as calm and motionless as a statue, watching the battle of wills intently.

"It would be your duty to stop us cost what it may," Rori meanwhile goes on, unperturbed by us bristling around in her back and the sharp metal at her throat. "But if there is doubt in your heart, if you at least sometimes wonder, if Loghain's actions truly are the one and only way to save Ferelden, if you at least sometimes feel regret or reluctance when you loyally obey his orders... then I beg you, listen to your heart."

The effect of these words on Ser Cauthrien is... unexpected. At least I did not expect her to lower her sword and tumble a step backwards. I did not expect that shocked and pained expression on her face, the fear and sadness in her eyes. She's not the unwavering knight anymore that she was only a few words ago.

"I have had so many doubts of late," she mutters more to herself than speaking to Rori. Her sword suddenly seems too heavy for her, weighing her down when until now she has wielded it with pride. "Loghain is a great man but his hatred of Orlais has driven him to madness. He has done... terrible things." Cauthrien admits, speaking in a voice so low, it's hardly audible. "I know it," she breathes. "But I owe him everything. I cannot betray him, do not ask me to." Thus said, she lifts her blade once more, ready for the inevitable fight to come. With her all the guards and on our side everybody but Rori draw their weapons, too.

"Your first duty is to protect Ferelden," Rori says calmly, gently, "and you know, Loghain would agree."

With a loud clatter Cauthrien's sword falls to the ground. The knight's face is ashen when her eyes meet Rori's. Something dies inside of her that moment... I don't understand why she's so damn fond of Loghain... she says she owes him... I can only imagine he is her Duncan. Maker! Then she deserves my sympathy. Not that Duncan was or ever would have been anything like Loghain... but I believe, I can understand what Loghain means to Cauthrien...

"I never thought duty would taste so bitter," she croaks as she steps out of our way. "Stop him, stop him from betraying everything he once loved." Her legs don't support her anymore and she drops to her knees, taking hold of Rori's hand as she is about to pass by. "Please, show mercy! Without Loghain there would be no Ferelden to defend."
"I won't lie to you," Rori says sadly, squeezing the knight's hand for comfort. "I cannot make any promises. It depends on the Landsmeet, it depends on Loghain himself..."

Ser Cauthrien nods slowly. "I understand," she mutters with tears in her eyes as she lets go of Rori's hand.

"And we're not even at the Landsmeet itself," I mutter once we gather in front of the great doors. According to the noise from inside, the debate has already started without us.

Rori's answer is a fierce, though disappointingly short kiss. "I love you," she whispers, sounding as desperate and devastated as Ser Cauthrien.

Before I can answer, Zevran smacks mine and Rori's back and grinning broadly, he cheerfully exclaims: "Ready for the celebrity death match?"

"No?" Rori and I squeak unison.

"Alas, ready or not, here we go!"

Doom!

DOOM!

Chapter End Notes

Notevensorry says, I will have to write a bonus chapter to tell what really happened at the Gnawed Noble...
We're late. Partly because of our little conversation with Cauthrien, partly because it takes Rori five minutes to convince Shale that tearing out the wings of the door and throwing them into the hall might indeed make quite an impression but that a less aggressive entry might redound to our advantage.

"Nobles usually don't react well on getting struck dead by a door thrown by a golem," Rori explains when she gently pushes the door open and sneaks into the wide hall crammed with the Ferelden nobility. She's terribly nervous and so am I. Usually I'd take her hand but Eamon would skin us alive if we walked in there holding hands. It's another impression we do not want to give...

"They just can't take a joke," I sigh, patting the disappointed golem's arm. "See, when everything goes wrong you can throw whatever and whoever you want." The vision of Shale grabbing a screaming Loghain and swinging him like a dead cat before she sends him flying through the closed window pops up in my mind... now, that indeed would be something I'd like to see...

The huge hall where the Landsmeet takes place has several rows of benches on both sides of the central stage. It reminds me a bit of the dwarven proving pit in Orzammar and since -according to Rori - a Landsmeet isn't a real Landsmeet without at least one brawl, the whole tense atmosphere feels a lot like the pit, too. Without the merry dwarven families and their fan stuff, without the Hot Nugs and the beer... But there's for sure a whole lot of very loud and very agitated folks here and they are all armed... and it's Rori and me again in the middle of deep shit trouble... Wynne's words, not mine.

Some nobles come here with the mere intention to pick a fight and start one or two blood feuds that then can be used to start some minor wars and attack their neighbours once they're back home in their castles. Everybody needs a hobby, you see...

"Papa took me with him once when I was a child," Rori whispers to me when we slowly push through the assembled crowd - who quickly make room once Shale has absolutely accidentally stepped on some bann's foot - after he called Rori a bitch and me a clown. "Uncle Angus pulled off his boot and hauled it at some bann after he kept complaining about how terribly the Mac Eanraigs stank of fish. And suddenly everybody was hauling their boots and shoes at each other. I hid behind King Maric's throne - with King Maric - and we shared the sugarroasted almonds Papa had bought for me."

It's somewhat strange how everybody and their dog - and Rori - seems to know my father better than I do. I collect more and more details but the picture is long not complete. I've always tried not to think about him too much - and failed miserably. And one thing about becoming king that I both fear and look forward to, is that it closes the distance between my royal father and me... well, not really... but, you know, I've always wondered why he never cared about me, not once talked to me even when he visited Eamon... I made up stories about him, how some evil mage kept him from acknowledging me, how he one day would come to finally take me home... Of course it never happened and I stayed lonely and unwanted. I tried to understand his actions and couldn't. The only conclusion I could come to, it had to be my fault. When I was a child it only made me sad, angry when I grew older... and now here I am, following in his footsteps... Did he feel as insecure and small as I do right now? Did he feel like running away but kept moving forward because that was the only direction he could go?

Eamon's appearance breaks my trail of thought. It also silences the assembled nobility. Just like that. He steps forward and puts his hands onto the balustrade and the discussions and arguments die and
everybody just looks at him expectantly... Even the whimpering bann with his broken foot stops his
whining. Arl Eamon Guerrin has a certain presence, something that marks him as someone
outstanding... Nobody ever falls silent when I want to say something... Most of the time they try to
shush me instead... well, not Rori... okay, sometimes she silences me, too... but she has such a nice
way to make sure I shut up and it usually ends with her and me making love to each other...

Duh, stop babbling, Alistair! There's the real big players deciding about your future... and Rori's.
She's biting her fingernails until Wynne swats at her hands. I'd bite mine if I didn't wear gauntlets.

"My lords and ladies of the Landsmeet," Eamon drones. "Teyrn Loghain would have us give up our
freedoms, our traditions out of fear. He placed us on this path, yet we should place our destiny in his
hands? Must we sacrifice everything good about our nation to save it?"

There's a tepid applause from the nobles - and standing ovations and loud whistling from the Mac
Eanraigs. They are all there, leaning against the balustrade, Bann Angus Mac Eanraig, Aunt Agnes
and Uncle Ronan and Rori's cousins James (still wearing a bandage from arm-wrestling Shale),
Jessica and Juliana and Tracy. They carry so many weapons with them, they clonk and rattle
whenever they as much as blink.

"Hey, Loghain!" James Mac Eanraig yells, lifting his kilt. "Kiss my ass!" While the male Mac
Eanraigs follow his example, presenting some more or less hairy hindquarters to anybody who cares
to take a look, the female Mac Eanraigs have a facepalm moment. There's a whole lot howling and
wolf-whistling and cheering - mostly form the other kilt wearing clans - and a whole lot of indignant
murmurs and icy glares - mostly from those who believe themselves to be more sophisticated. James
would topple over the railing if not for his sisters grabbing him before he can fall on top of Bann
Esmerelle's head... oh, she doesn't look happy. Not at all. Her mouth is a thin line and her icy glare is
so cold, she and Anora could have practiced it together.

"Are they... are they drunk?" I whisper to Rori who is waving cheerfully at her relatives - who are
waving back with as much enthusiasm.

"During a Landsmeet? Of course."

"Good of them," Oghren grunts. "The only ones here with at least some common sense."

Unperturbed, Loghain steps into the very center of the hall, clapping his hands mockingly. His
presence has the same effect as Eamon's and the ruckus quickly calms down. Even the Mac Eanraigs
and their fellow Storm Coast clans decide it's not that bad an idea to hear what Loghain has to say.
He is as arrogant and self-righteously confident as I recall him... Okay, I only saw him a few times as
a child - and was terribly intimidated by him. Then I ran into him like once or twice at Ostagar and
there I still thought him to be cool and competent... Loghain was a legend back then and next to
goofy Cailan he seemed like the man who should be in charge...

So here we are again, another goofy young man and the ruthless general. Who would you choose to
save this nation?

"A fine performance, Eamon, but no one here is taken in by it," Loghain sneers. He wears his shiny
armour and is flanked by his guards, strolling through this hall as if it belonged to him. I wish I had
one third of his self-confidence... that would probably stop me from hiding behind Shale... she just
reaches behind her and shoves me back into the spotlight... And I thought we were friends!

"I am, Loghain! And you wouldn't dare call me no one, would you?" Bann Angus barks, slamming
his fists down on the balustrade.
Loghain completely ignores Angus as if he was indeed no one. Instead he keeps addressing Eamon without looking at him. He talks to the whole audience as if he was the spokesman of the Fereldan nobility. "You would attempt to put a puppet on the throne and every soul here knows it."

"That man is smarter than he looks," Morrigan observes.

"Hey!" I pout. This really hurts my manly feelings... okay, I've never done much to prove that I am more than - how did Anora call me? - biddable... I begin to realize that nobody will ever believe me to be anything but an easily manipulated fool if I don't start speaking for myself... It would be so much easier, though, if I didn't put my foot in my mouth whenever I open it. Sometimes it's even both feet... or my whole leg...

"The better question is: Who will pull the strings?" Loghain drones dramatically, leering at his audience as if he hadn't already spotted the culprit. I have to admit, it's quite a show - although the effect isn't that great anymore with James Mac Eanraig making farting noises. Agnes slaps the back of her nephew's head and glowers at her brothers when they both snicker.

"Ah! Here we have the pupeteer!" Loghain shouts, pointing his finger at Rori when she comes forward with me by her side and her companions in tow. Even without throwing doors our entry is remarkable. A dwarf, an elf, two mages - one of them half-naked - a Qunari, a golem, a mabari and a nug - next to them Leliana, Rori and I almost seem dull.

At Loghain's outburst Rori frowns and turns to look over her shoulder to find out who he's actually talking about. Her innocent confusion comes so natural, it would be impossible to feign it. She has only just arrived and she already begins to sweep people off their feet, turning the tables on Loghain without an effort. Trying to mark her as cold, calculating and power hungry so won't work. That's just not the first impression people get when seeing Rori.

"He means you," I care to enlighten her, nudging her side.

"Who? I?" Rori exclaims, wide eyed.

"And I am the puppet," I sigh. "No surprise there."

"Tell us, Warden, how will the Orlesians take our nation from us?" Loghain spits at the petite redhead, completely ignoring my presence. Yeah, act as if I wasn't there! I'm just the claimant of the throne, it's not that I got anything to say here.

"You should address her correctly, Loghain. She is Teyrna Rori Cousland of Highever!" Leonas Bryland shouts and the cheering, the applause and stomped feet turn Loghain's expression from grim to super-über-grim. Rori just inclines her head, managing to appear both humble and grand at the very same time - but I so know that she's grinning from ear to ear behind that curtain of red curls that hides her face.

"How will the Orlesians take Ferelden from us?" Loghain repeats when the uproar has died down - thanks to Rori lifting her hand in a gesture asking for silence. I have to bite my lips to stop myself from poking out my tongue at Mac Tir. "Will they deign to send their troops, or simply issue their commands through this would-be-prince?"

Rori and I exchange one look and she taps her index finger to her forehead, indicating that Loghain has to be completely nuts. Some nobles groan... The Orlesian threat is clearly Loghain's most favourite topic.

"Oh, I wouldn't be too worried. I don't talk Orlesian," I laugh, deciding that I don't like being called a
would-be-prince by someone who still looks west when there's a horde approaching from the south. Loghain should have some serious talk with Sten. The Qunari would certainly point him into the right direction. "That makes issuing commands through me much more difficult."

Loghain is the most humourless person I have ever seen in my whole life. While some nobles snicker and some roll their eyes and some whisper 'Just like Maric!' - the teyrn scowls at me and then again decides I'm not worth being acknowledged, turning his attention back to Rori. He towers over her now she's standing in front of him and it is pretty hard to believe that this cute young girl with her large blue eyes and all those tiny freckles adorning her heartshaped face is a treacherous mastermind. A puppet herself, yeah, that's what some could believe her to be - at least until Rori teaches them wrong... which probably will happen soon considering the way she grits her teeth.

"What did they offer you? How much is the price of Ferelden honour now?" Loghain barks at her.

"Orlesians?" Rori echoes, making this single word sound as if she was severly and honestly worried about Loghain's sanity. Leliana behind me sighs in delight. Ever since we arrived at Eamon's estate the bard has been trying to teach Rori some tricks - only to witness how her fellow ginger completely failed when confronting Anora. Unable to rein in her temper, she had the bard despair. "Why in the name of the Maker are you talking about Orlesians?" Rori frowns at Loghain. Her voice rings like a bell, clear and strong and yet it's young and innocent without the acid that Loghain pours over her with words. "As long as Orlesians nowadays don't disguise as darkspawn - and I admit you never know with their latest fashion -, I dare say we can forget about them for now... We have a Blight going on, tons of darkspawn, an archdemon... The darkspawn is the real threat, not Orlais. If we don't unite to fight the hordes, there will be nothing left of Ferelden for Orlais to invade."

Leliana almost squeals and only with some effort manages to turn it into a cough. Zevran gives thumbs up and winks at me. Wynne is utterly pleased about seeing Loghain picked apart. Her expression shows grim satisfaction while Sten sighs and rolls his eyes. For the Qunari this is all a waste of time. Oghren has vanished - and it takes me some time to find him again amongst the Mac Eanraigs as only the top of his head is visible over the balustrade.

"There are enough refugees in my bannorn by now to make that abundandly clear," Bann Alfstanna remarks. "I really wonder why we waste time with talking about Orlais here!"

"The south is fallen," Arl Wulff declares. He is an old man who had to see his son die, taken by the darkspawn while Loghain fought the ghosts of his past. "Loghain! Will you let darkspawn take the whole country for fear of Orlais."

Rori vs. Loghain, 1:0.

"The Blight is indeed real, Wulff," Loghain admits, trying to turn his defeat into a victory. "But do we need Grey Wardens to fight it?"

Teyrn Loghain Mac Tir really can't stand the Grey Wardens. I really wonder why? What did we do to him? It's probably something about Orlais. With Loghain it's always something about Orlais...

"They claim that they alone can end the Blight, yet they failed spectacularly against the darkspawn at Ostagar, and they ask to bring with them four legions of chevaliers," Loghain shouts, lifting his chin triumphantly. He doesn't even notice this doesn't earn him any bonus points. "And once we open our borders to the Chevaliers, can we really expect them to simply return to whence they came?"

"Never flog a dead horse," Wynne mutters with glee while the teyrn keeps digging his own grave with his stubborn insistence. And there I thought myself to be the only one capable of digging a
"We do not have any chevaliers following us, but - while you sold Ferelden citizens into slavery to fund your war - we gained the alliance of Orzammar, Kinloch Hold and the Dalish to defend Ferelden," Rori cuts me short, when I open my mouth to exactly tell Loghain who I believe to be a spectacular failure. I don't understand why Rori doesn't defend Duncan and our dead brothers in arms, why she doesn't point at Loghain and calls him a kingslayer. Instead she ignores the accusation but changes the topic as if Ostagar has never happened. I try to draw her attention to me, blinking, wiggling my eyebrows, twitching the corners of my mouth - and she just looks at me as if everything was totally fine. Okay, actually she very much looks as if she was trying to bite back a laugh rather unsuccessfully.

"Stop that," she mouthes, then hands the documents we found with the slavers to Grand Cleric Elemena who identifies the proof as authentic.

"What's this?" Bann Sighard barks. "There is no slavery in Ferelden! Explain yourself!"

Proving Loghain was involved in selling elves into slavery causes an uproar amongst the nobles that has everybody forget about Ostagar. Eamon warned us to use Ostagar and Cailan's death as an argument. He said, we could never win it. There is no way to prove what really happened, different versions of the story circulated for too long. He said, we should stick to the things we can prove, and that's what Rori does, avoiding the topic. Clever little beast!

"There is no saving the Alienage," Loghain does explain himself - and this does not earn him any favour with the nobles. They might be elves but they are Ferelden elves living in Ferelden dirt. You can't just sell them away to live in Tevinter dirt! "There is no chance of holding it if the Blight comes here." Loghain doesn't seem happy about that decision - and still he made it. As far as we know, he didn't even consider a different approach to solve the problem. Even before Ostagar he tried to cut Cailan off any influence he identified as Orlesian, murdering the Couslands with Howe's help, poisoning Eamon. Without him, we wouldn't be here and had to deal with this mess only he created...

"Despite what you may think, Warden..." Loghain turns to face Rori.

"Teyrna Rori Cousland!" Agnes Mac Eanraig shouts and there's another outburst of cheers and applause.

"... I have done my duty. Whatever my regrets may be for the elves, I have done what was needed for the good of Ferelden," Loghain stubbornly finishes once he can make himself audible again.

"Did you also let Howe torture citizens for the good of Ferelden?" Rori retorts so quickly, it's as if she slapped Loghain in the face.

Yay! Go, Gingersnaps, go!

"Teyrna Rori speaks truly. My son was taken under the cover of night. The things Howe did to him... some are beyond any healer's skill," Bann Sighard calls out, his voice trembling with sorrow and anger.

Howe also kidnapped little children to influence their parents' decision at the Landsmeet. But it's like Rori foresaw, Loghain has gotten rid of Howe before he could turn into a problem, so his answer shouldn't surprise me. It still makes me freaking angry.

"Howe was a grown man, responsible for his own actions," Loghain begins but that has Angus Mac
Eanraig jump off his seat and slam his axe down on the balustrade in front of him.

"Howe murdered my sister Teyrna Eleanor Cousland and her whole family!" Angus roars. "Well, not Rori," he adds with an uncle's pride. He smiles broadly at her and gives her thumbs up. Then his expression becomes grim again. "And you, Loghain, declared that bastard Teyrn of Highever and Arl of Denerim!"

"That's unfair! I am Arl of Denerim!" Vaughan Kendells whines. "Howe betrayed me like he betrayed the Couslands!"

"Just you are still alive," Angus Mac Eanraig observes gloomily, regarding Vaughan as if he came across a fat rat poking its head out of its hole.

"Howe will answer to the Maker for his crimes, as must we all," Loghain tries to end the discussion.

"You allied with this murderous bastard!" Angus bellows, his face as bright red as a tomato while he tries to pull his axe free from the ballustrade.

"Teyrn Cousland and his wife and family were traitors," Loghain shouts unnervedly. "This woman here..." He points at Rori. "... is not a teyrna but the murderer of Rendon Howe..."

"Howe was a coward," Leonas Bryland cuts Loghain short. "He was a greedy little rat who would have never turned against the Couslands without making sure he got rewarded for it. So whatever you want to tell us, Loghain, those who knew Howe and knew the Couslands will never buy your story about Rendon Howe getting this idea all on his own and of Bryce and Eleanor being traitors." He glowers at Loghain with disgust. Only the Mac Eanraigs look gloomier.

"Whatever Howe may have done, he should have been brought before the seneschal," Loghain insists. "There is no justice in butchering a man in his home..."

Big mistake.

Mighty big mistake.

My hand comes down on Rori's shoulder same time as Zevran grabs her arm. I can feel the shiver that runs through her and the following tension. Loghain's words are mocking her and the tragedy she had to witness when Howe came to her father's house to butcher him and her whole family. For me it's just one more reason to wish for wiping that sneer off his face with my blade.

Meanwhile it takes several men to stop Angus from lunging himself at Loghain. It's as if they were trying to wrestle down a bear.

When Rori looks up and puts her hand on mine, she smiles a smile that chills me to the bone. Then she says with the sweetest voice: "No? Then why did you send a blood mage to poison Arl Eamon?"

How she manages to make her voice sound over all this noise, is beyond me. But her words have an immediate effect, even on Uncle Angus who freezes in the process of hauling poor Leonas Bryland over the balustrade. He straightens, pulls his buddy Bryland back to his feet and promises to buy him a beer or two.

"I assure you, Warden..."

"Teyrna Rori Cousland!" the Mac Eanraig triplets shout in unison. It follows the same procedure as every time Loghain refuses to address Rori with her title. Not that she would insist. But here at the Landsmeet it certainly doesn't hurt that she is the daughter of the most powerful man next to the king,
a man who many wished to be king instead of Cailan. Even dead Bryce Cousland is still a threat.

"... if I were going to send someone, it would be my own soldiers. I would not trust to the discretion of an apostate," Loghain arrogantly lectures Rori.

Whoa! That bastard is such a blunt liar! And he doesn't even blush. Just looks Rori in the face and lies when he knows she knows and I know, too, and there's Zevran standing right there, another assassin he hired.

"Indeed!" Bann Alfstanna exclaims, her voice hardly hiding the contempt she feels for Loghain. "My brother tells a very different tale. He says you snatched a blood mage from the Chantry's justice. Coincidence?"

"Do not think the Chantry will overlook this, Teyrn Loghain! Interference in a templar's sacred duties is an offense against the Maker!" the Grand Cleric declares. Boy, she looks pissed off! I've seen her that pissed off before when Duncan used the Right of Conscription on me, and I can assure you she considers to excommunicate Loghain right here and now.

When her eyes wander from Loghain to Rori, the redhead grins sheepishly. She after all has recruited the very blood mage we are talking about for the Grey Wardens. I doubt the Grand Cleric would give her that small nod if she knew how Jowan and Solona happily experiment with darkspawn at Warden's Peak. And that doesn't even include Avernus. If the Grand Cleric knew anything about him, she'd sent an army of templars to blow up Warden's Peak and drag us all off to Aeonar.

Then the Grand Cleric for the first time cares to look at me and she despairs. She looks back at Loghain, then at me, and the way her lips move she's silently praying to the Maker.

Did I mention I sucked as a templar? I sucked so much, that they wouldn't let me take part in the tourney held in the honour of the Grey Wardens. I only fought there because Duncan insisted. The Grand Cleric probably thought I would pull my smallclothes over my head and cluck like a chicken, flapping my arms as wings if she let me appear in front of the guest of honour... To be fair, I've actually really done this before... the chicken and smallclothes thing. Not at the tourney of course but back at the Chantry. Being a templar was just so incredibly boring... Anyway, here I am now, and she certainly wished for Loghain to win until now. I am a disgrace - but at least I don't ally with blood mages... Well, as far as she knows...

"Howe's death still was murder..." Loghain tries once more and earns himself some Boos! Blood feuds are still a big thing amongst Ferelden nobles, despite the monarchs ever since Calenhad trying to make them behave. Loghain really should know that. He just earned Rori the respect of her fellow nobles. If your family gets slaughtered by a rat-faced bastard, you go and make him pay. You do not run to your king and have him solve your problems... That admittedly makes being the leader of the Ferelden nobility a whole lot of more difficult because they just do whatever they want to do and expect their king/queen to mind their own business. That, however, doesn't stop them from blaming the king/queen when whatever they want to do goes terribly wrong. At least that's Rori's resumé of Ferelden politics.

Or as Leonas Bryland puts it: "And as for Howe's death... good of you, girl! That he didn't die years ago is the only thing worth mourning here."

"Enough of this! Whatever I have done, I will answer to it later," Loghain snaps with that pained look on his face... Maker! He just got scolded by the Grand Cleric in front of the whole nobility of Ferelden. I know how that feels, being scolded by that woman... It happened to me whenever I crossed her path. In the end I was told over and over again, they'd send me off to Anderfels as soon as possible just to get rid of me. It has to feel like a very bad joke to the Grand Cleric that I'm here
now, claiming the throne.

Yeah, the Maker moves in mysterious ways...

"I have a question for you, Warden!" Loghain turns to Rori, squinting his eyes at her.

"Teyrna Rori Cousland!" Bann Alfstanna shouts.

By now the Teyrn of Gwaren is rather unnerved by the fact that the nobility is so insubordinate. I doubt, he thought this to be easy or he wouldn't have made the effort of trying to murder us over and over again. But he certainly didn't expect that much hostility and disrespect. I almost feel sorry for him... okay, no, I don't. It's more likely that... that I sleep with Morrigan... than feeling sorry for Loghain... Eww! We all know that will never ever happen. The mere thought... bah! It makes me shudder...

"What have you done with my daughter?" Loghain demands to know.

"What have you done with her that she came running to me?" Rori retorts but she sounds wary. Anora's disappearance means we do not know where she is while we know she is absolutely capable of absolutely everything. Not the best combination.

"You took my daughter - our queen - by force, killing her guards in the process," Loghain shouts at Rori, casting a look at the lords and ladies but right now most of them appear unwilling to believe a single thing Loghain says.

Rori and I exchange a look and roll our eyes. It is astonishing over and over again how the Mac Tirs twist the truth for their own benefit and manage to sound so self-righteously indignant,

"What arts have you employed to keep her..." Loghain goes on.

Rori grins sheepishly, obviously thinking of the bricked up door...

"Does she even still live?" Loghain asks and it's all the big worried-father-act. He is so false, even Morrigan appears sweet and cuddly compared to him.

"I believe I can speak for myself."

Groaning Rori turns to the sound of Anora's voice. As the queen enters the hall, her gaze sweeps over the younger woman and over me and there's nothing but coldness in there. She's perfectly beautiful, graceful and majestic... and yet she lacks any warmth. She's just a female version of Loghain - although she looks a lot like her mother. Would be better for us if it was the other way round.

"Blast! We should have kept that door bricked up," Rori mutters under her breath.
"Lords and ladies of Ferelden, hear me!" Anora calls out in her clear voice. A glorious grace surrounds her. Rori appears cute and impish next to her, like a clumsy puppy next to a proud mabari bitch. Anora for sure looks like a queen but she doesn't have the heart of a queen.

Sure of her audience Anora goes on once the surprised murmurs have faded. "This Warden..." She points at Rori. "... has slandered and defamed Ferelden's greatest hero in a bid to put an imposter on Maric's throne..."

"Teyrna! Bloody blast it!" Angus Mac Eanraig barks, his voice clearly audible over the cries of disbelief and the insults hauled at us. I catch Rori slightly nodding at Leliana and then our companions start moving in my back. It's nothing anybody would notice but I've fought with all of them for so long to realize, Rori is preparing our exit in case all this goes terribly wrong. One look at the Mac Eanraigs and it becomes obvious that Oghren is up there not only for the ale but for instructing them, too.

Can't blame Rori for taking percautions. The way Anora regards us, is quite alarming. She's colder than a glacier in the Frostback Mountains.

Loghain's expression changes from gloomy to triumphant. Maker! I wish for nothing more than to punch him in the face right now.

"Imposter? Is it only me who recalls her saying Cailan knew about his little brother?" I grumble under my breath. Even I can see what she's aiming at. Tell them, I'm not Maric's son, plant the seed of doubt and hope it will blossom within the next five minutes. "What is wrong with the Mac Tirs? They lie and betray and assassins whoever stands in their way and still act as if we are the criminals here!"

"Ferelden's greatest hero tried to kill you!" Rori exclaims totally flabbergasted. I guess, she expected Anora to cause trouble but not to side with her father.

"Did he? Are you certain of that?" Anora retorts coolly. She's so sure of herself, nothing about her behaviour gives away that she is lying her head off.

"Well, that's what you told me. If anybody has issues with being certain, then it's obviously you," Rori snorts, arms akimbo.

"I know my father. He would never do less than his utmost for the sake of this country" Anora says matter-of-factly. "But I needed to know your mind."

"Ohh, I see, so all this rescue the damsel in distress was a test?" I laugh, so not amused. "Charming."

"You could have proven yourself an ally for Ferelden, Rori Cousland," Anora continues, ignoring me. It's as if I wasn't existent unless they feel like insulting me. "It is unfortunate for all of us, that you did not."

Rori heaves a sigh that is pure frustration. With obvious dismay she shakes her head when Shale offers to crush some skulls. "Anora, you and your father seem to have major issues in distinguishing between allies for Ferelden and allies for the Mac Tirs," Rori says, sounding calmer than she is. "And although you might believe that's the same: It is not. Stubbornly insisting on your way being the only possible one, has brought us here and has led your father to commit all these crimes against the people of Ferelden."
Before Rori can say more, Loghain shoves her aside, spreading his arms as he speaks. He radiates aggression and self-confidence. It's in his stance, his voice, his expression. His glare dares anybody who looks him in the eyes to challenge him. Most avoid it - but not Rori. She defiantly stares back.

"Who here can say that Anora is not fit to rule this land..." Loghain shouts.

Rori raises her hand, so do I, the rest of our party and all the Mac Eanraigs.

"And who can say that this Alistair is?"

All raised hands - save Morrigan's - stay raised - even mine because Rori stomps on my foot when I begin to lower it.

"It's actually Prince Alistair, Loghain," Leonas Bryland chooses to correct Ferelden's greatest hero.

"We know nothing of him save that he may have royal blood." Loghain points out. "For five years, Anora has been queen and proven herself worthy of the Theirin name." With a dramatic gesture Loghain turns to point at his daughter. "She can lead our people through this crisis..."

"Excuse me, but when she's so capable of leading, then why didn't you let her lead? Or did she give her consent to all those things you did?" Bann Alfstanna demands to know.

"...and I can lead her armies," Loghain goes on. James Mac Eanraig turns to lift his kilt again and I begin to regard a kilt as a really useful garment.

"Last time I saw him lead an army, he lead it away from the battlefield and left us all there to die, including poor Cailan," Wynne hisses audible for everybody who cares to listen.

Loghain meanwhile paces the hall, his voice sounds strong and grim with an unwavering determination. "My lords and ladies, we Fereldans have proven that we will never really be conquered as long as we united. We must not let ourselves be divided now." He punches his fist at his palm. "Stand with me and we shall even defeat the Blight itself."

With his head held high, Loghain stands there, his daughter backing him up. There's certainty in their stance. The message is clear: With the Mac Tirs in charge, the victory is ours!

"You ask for an alliance when it was you who tore this nation apart with an unnecessary civil war," Rori raises her voice as soon as Loghain falls silent. "You were fighting foes where there weren't any and completely misunderstood the evil we have to deal with. Ferelden doesn't need a ruler who is caught in the past. It needs a man who can lead it into the future."

Her words earn her a thunderous applause. The Mac Eanraigs and Oghren shout "ROOOOARI! ROOOOARI!" before lunging into the Proving Ground battle chant: "Come on Rooooaari kick some ass!"

"You know," I tease, nudging her side. "They should better make you queen and instead of putting a puppet king on the throne directly aim for the puppeteer... Hey! Don't panic!" I laugh. "Attention please, It's election time..."

"South Reach stands with the Grey Wardens. I trust in Rori Cousland and Alistair Theirin," Leonas Bryland declares.

"Waking Seas stands with the Grey Wardens!" Bann Alfstanna calls out and Bann Sighard follows suit.
"Rori, Alistair, you kick the blasted darkspawn asses back to where they came from!" Angus Mac Eanraig roars.

"Denerim will follow the Wardens," Vaughan Kendells shouts. Maker! Even this sadistic prick keeps his promise to support us! Blast! Somehow I was still hoping, Anora would magically change into a nice and honourable person and I could just step back like a gentleman and let the lady have her kingdom... Should be queendom then, shouldn't it? I really don't necessarily want it, but, Maker, I cannot let Eamon down now - and Ferelden - because this nation certainly deserves better than being ruled by this... bitch and her tyrant father! I mean, I'm a fool but Eamon isn't and Rori isn't... but will she still be there? I can't imagine she will be delighted to hear about the heir problem and what it means for us...

Oh blast it!

I start praying for Maric making an appearance right now. He's only missing, so this really would be a damn good time for a return, right?

But of course Maric doesn't march in and punch Loghain in the face, call me Son and I call him Dad... Nope, nothing like that... Seems I have for once get this done all by myself...

Western Hills and Redcliffe pro. Amarenthine and Bann Ceorlic contra... More and more nobles vote and it becomes obvious that Rori has rocked this show. She unites Ferelden. She could have won without me and my Theirin blood if necessary.

I'm not that stupid to believe they voted for me. It's Rori they support, her name that opens doors and buys us the trust of the Ferelden nobility. Loghain was right about that, they do not know me, but they know Rori... or at least they know her family. Bryland told me, Bryce Cousland was considering giving the teyrnir to Rori instead of Fergus. Despite her being feisty and stubborn - especially when confronted with a possible groom - Bryce saw what she could become when growing up. He and Eleanor prepared her for that day, despite her resistance. And Maker, they did a damn good job!

If anybody cared to ask for my opinion, that's where Loghain made his biggest mistake in this argument. I might be a puppet but as long as Rori is the puppeteer, nobody gives a damn. Anora herself said that everybody here knows that she ruled instead of Cailan, so why should they care with Rori and me?

Just how am I going to get all this done without her... She wouldn't stay, would she?

Maker! This drives me crazy. I don't know what to do, what to want... well, I want Rori... but who am I to put myself first when there's a whole nation depending on me... Did I just think that? Ohhhh, now I feel sick...

The Mac Eanraigs already open the barrels of ale they've been sitting on. I wish they would hand me a mug - or a whole barrel because I so do need a drink. Rori won the damn Landsmeet... I feel so dizzy... There's cheering and shouts, James starts to blow air into his bagpipe, Angus bearhugs Arl Bryland... The only ones absolutely not looking happy are Loghain and Anora. No surprise there...

But if you now think that everything is fine and they lived happily ever after, then you haven't yet understood that the Mac Tirs so totally can't accept an opinion that is not their own. Loghain starts to insult the nobility of Ferelden as traitors and idiots. Of course he's the only one here with some common sense and the only one who knows how to make things right.

While he still rants, his loyal soldiers close in on the nobles. Blast! Does he really want to start a fight
"Can someone please make that sodding bastard shut the fuck up, bloody blast it!" Angus Mac Eanraig roars, pulling his axe free from the balustrade as he turns to meet one of the soldiers in his back.

I make a step forward since I've been long waiting for shutting this self-righteous bastard up. I'm gonna stuff his mouth with my fist and... that's when Rori suddenly is in my way, face to face with Loghain, head held high and that expression on her face that Howe called the Cousland stare.

"Call off your men and we'll settle this honourably," she says, calmly, almost softly. When she starts talking to me like that, I know I'm in for some trouble and we're going to have a fight about me using her toothbrush to clean my chainmail or just dropping my stinking socks anywhere inside our tent or piling up my muddy clothes on her clean ones... Better not get her any more riled up then.

Loghain, however, picks a fight with her. I would have expected him to refuse, but there still seems some last bits of honour left inside of him. He looks sad, almost broken. "When we met at Ostagar, I would never have thought it would end like this. But Ostagar seems like it happened in another lifetime, to someone else."

"It is still very close for me," I mutter mournfully in the deathly quiet that followed Rori's challenge. Rori and Wynne solemnly nod in agreement. "We returned there, you know. It was a graveyard. We found Cailan, saw what the darkspawn did to him... He didn't deserve to die like this. Neither did Duncan. At least Cailan can now rest in peace."

Loghain's stare bores into me. It's the first time he really acknowledges my presence. Until now he has talked about me as if I wasn't there, like people do with little children. But now, he really sees me and his expression changes but only for a moment so brief, I wonder if I was hallucinating.

When Loghain speaks again, he addresses Rori, ignoring me like always. "Will you face me yourself or have you a champion?"

Rori turns to me same time as I step forward. Maker! I have waited for this moment for so long! She has to let me fight! "Alistair," Rori says. "Alistair is my champion - and his own. It is his fight as he is the rightful heir to the throne."

"Then let us test the mettle of our would be king," Loghain sneers. A sneer I am so going to wipe off his face. Never in my life have I been more certain of myself than right now. There's a confidence in me so strong and alien. Loghain will not win this fight. He will not survive this fight. "Prepare yourself!" the general barks.

"Let's not waste any more time with talking then," I growl, approaching him.

That's when Rori calls: "Wait!" She looks pale, worried... frightened, her eyes dark pools of concern.

"What is it now?" Loghain snaps.

Without paying any attention to him, Rori hugs me tight. Wraps her arms around my neck and presses herself to me as close as my armour allows her. I can feel nothing of her, the armour prevents it - but her tension is obvious. The Mac Eanraigs all go AWWWWWW! while Eamon has a facepalm moment. We actually agreed on not letting anybody know how Rori and I feel for each other. Still, I'm glad she hugged me... and a bit huffed. "Hey! You could at least have some confidence in me," I sulk.
"I do have confidence," Rori pouts. "As much as you had in me when I had to fight all alone in the Proving Ground."

"Ahhh... touché!" I laugh, nuzzling her nose before letting go of her. "Now, be a good girl and let me get this done, yes?"

I turn to Loghain and the smile for Rori is wiped of my face, making place for an expression of stern determination... at least I do hope that's what I look like. Grim, dangerous, manly - with that frown and my eyes squinted and my jaws set tight. Fear is not existent at this moment. All worries about mine and Rori's future, all grief and sorrow, it's replaced by a chilly fury, a cold and calculating resoluteness. Everything around me fades. This is only Loghain and me.

We circle each other, eyes locked. I am tense and calm at the same time. I flex my fingers without reaching for my weapon - formerly my father's. It's Loghain to draw his sword first, a frown on his face as he crouches low, carefully waiting for the right moment to charge.

The moment he makes one step forward, I pull Maric's dragonbone blade with the dim glowing blue runes from its sheath... At it's sight Loghain tumbles one step backward, recognition and regret crossing his features - then, with a battle cry, he lunges himself at me...

Loghain is a tough nut to crack. He is old but experienced, one of the best fighters of Ferelden ever. He can land a few sharp and strong blows I can hardly block with my shield or sword, forcing me to retreat. He jumps after me, gasping in surprise when I step out of the way sideways and it's mere luck that he raises his blade in time to meet mine.

Maker! Aint't I lucky that Rori managed to persuade Cauthrien to leave us alone? I'm not sure I could make it through if I had already been exhausted or wounded by another fight. Loghain's sword soars past my defense and I can feel blood tickling down my thigh. Nothing bad, but it slows me down. I am still faster and more dexterous than my opponent. He's panting by now, sweat is pouring down his forehead, dripping into his eyes, blinding him. His movements become clumsy and the sword seems too heavy for him... I double my efforts to force him down, having my blows drum down on him with as much strength and speed as I can manage, whooping the proud general with my attack.

Loghain stumbles backwards when my sword hits his arm. He drops his sword same time as he drops to his knees.

The Landsmeet is cast in deathly silence as I tower over him. It's so tempting to just kick him into the dirt now, to humiliate him. I'm furious enough for sure. Inhaling deeply I retreat step by step, hardly listening when the Grand Cleric declares me the victor of this fight. I cannot make myself helping Loghain back to his feet. Strangely that makes me feel like an ass.

Anora hurries to her father's side, but he swats her hands away when she tries to help him and scrambles back to his feet alone. "So," he breathes, turning to face me. "There is some of Maric in you after all. Good."

For a moment I just stare at him. What!? I mean, what does he expect me to do now? Pat his back and go 'No hard feelings'!? I... I can't do that. Too much has happened, too much has been destroyed, so many have died. I look at him and I see the murderer of Duncan. Of my brothers in arms. Of Cailan. I see the man who plotted the death of Rori's family. Who poisoned Eamon. The man who sold elves into slavery, imprisoned and tortured those who objected him. I see the man who countless times tried to have Rori and me assassinated...

Anora stands between us, as if she was trying to shield her father from me. Or as if she was trying to build a bridge. It doesn't make a difference. Not to me. Not now. Maybe if she had not betrayed us...
if he had shown any regret... or maybe not...

"Forget Maric!" I spit. "This is for Duncan!"

"Father!" Anora gasps and turns to look at me... I've never seen her like that... she is silently pleading me, pleading Rori...

"Hush! It's over!" Loghain murmurs.

"Stop treating me like a child! This is serious!" Anora snaps, sounding desperate.

"Daughters never grow up, Anora," Loghain says softly. "They remain six years old with pigtails and skinned knees forever."

"Father..." Anora cries, covering her face with her hands.

I am so cold inside, cold and angry and driven by vengeance. I am unable to react to Anora's grief. It's as if I was frozen. One look at Rori... she's so pale, torn by her own emotions... When she looks at Anora, I can see her crumble inside. This has to remind her of another goodbye said by a daughter to her mother and father a long time ago at Highever. Meeting my eyes, she slowly nods her agreement.

I have never before killed a man like this. This is not a fight. It is an execution. Loghain is helpless. He is defeated. It feels awful, really, it does - and yet, it is what I must do. The sound of metal scraping against metal when I draw Maric's sword, the horror on Loghain's face that he tries not to let show...

I raise the blade... Maker! Has it always been that heavy? Nothing has ever felt so right and wrong at the same time... Out of the corner of my eyes, I notice Riordan hastily approaching us. Is he trying to stop me? Too late... The dragonbone slides through flesh and bones and cuts Loghain's head off his body.

Blood is splattered all over Anora and she lifts her arms to protect her face, turning away from the scene.

Loghain's head bounces down the hall like a ball and only comes to a rest at the steps of the dais in front of the throne. His dead eyes stare as if he still didn't understand how all this could go so terribly wrong. All the while his body is still standing there like rooted to the ground and only collapses when the head comes to a rest.

Mercifull Andraste!

The moment he drops down, Anora is at his side, kneeling in the puddle of blood that forms around his neck. Gasps and shouts from shocked nobles, gathering around the corpse and blocking it from my view, echo through the hall. None of them offers Anora a word or gesture of comfort. She's all alone.

"Alistair?"

"Huh?" I only notice how badly I tremble when Rori gently pries my fingers from the hilt of my sword.

"It's over," she says softly.

"I feel... terrible," I whisper hoarsely.
"I know." She pulls a handkerchief with my name stitched across it from her pocket and begins to wipe my face clean as if I was a child.

"But... he deserved it! This man abandoned our brothers and then blamed us for the deed. He hunted us down like animals... shouldn't I feel better now? They say revenge is sweet..." It is not. I mean, this was for Duncan, and that's good... but it's not sweet. Bittersweet, yes. There's a grim satisfaction, yet I am ashamed by Anora's tears... What did I do, killing her father right in front of her eyes? Maker, I really do feel sorry for her.

Rori takes my face in both of her hands and gently kisses my forehead. She's my sanctuary - and I am about to lose her.

"So it is decided. Alistair will take his father's throne," Eamon declares once Loghain's corpse got carried away.

Doom!

DOOM!

"Wait? What? No, when did this get decided? Nobody has decided that!" I exclaim, adding "Have they?" in a hushed and rather timid whisper directed at Rori - who only shrugs in reply and appears as lost as I am. Very helpful indeed! If she knew... if she had the slightest clue about what that means for her and me...

"He refuses the throne!" Anora's voice rings. "Everyone here has heard him. I think it's clear then: He abdicates in favour of me."

Wow. My knees still are like pudding and I feel much like everything has been turned upside down... and she, shortly after having cried over her father's body, is able to snatch any opportunity given to ensure she stays in power. That's... tough. If I hadn't witnessed her emotional breakdown I'd say she's made of ice. So I just stand there and gawk at her slack-jawed.

"I hardly think you are the appropriate person to mediate this Anora," Eamon lectures her. "Lady Rori, will you help us?"

"She's biased! We've all seen how she hugged him!" Anora shouts. "It's pretty clear what decision she will make. With Alistair she'll put a puppet on the throne..."

"Wouldn't be the first king with a woman ruling for him, would it, Anora?" Arl Leonas asks unnervedly. I take it, it's a rhetorical question. "Let Bryce's daughter decide!"

"I am sure Lady Rori only wishes for the best of Ferelden," Eamon adds, turning to a rather flabbergasted and stammering Rori. "The future of this kingdom is in your hands."

I don't want to walk in her shoes now. And she has no idea that it's not only the kingdom's but also her future. Blast! I should have told her about my talk with Eamon. Now it is too late.

Noticing everybody expectantly waits for her decision, Rori uneasily runs her fingers through her hair. "Err... I think I should talk to Anora and Alistair... Aehm, Anora, what makes you a better choice than Alistair?"

"Surely that's not a serious question," Anora snorts.

"Do you hear me laughing?" Rori retorts.
"I have been the ruler of this nation in all but name for the last five years. I can lead Ferelden. Alistair can't."

Her reason? That with me ruling, the civil war won't stop but go on until a new dynasty holds power - so why not start a new one right away with her?

"Alistair?" Rori turns to me after Anora has finished blaming me to be a brainless fool who couldn't even herd a flock of sheep without the help of a dozen advisors. Okay, that's not exactly what she said. But it's quite an apt summary.

"Strange," I chuckle without any humour. "I feel like back at the abbey, trying not to get chosen last for the sparring teams."

"What should I do?" Rori asks me, sounding as desperate and lost as I feel.

Okay. This is it. I can either run away for the rest of my life - but run with Rori - or I for once prove I got a spine and actually make use of it. Maker preserve me! This is the hardest decision I ever had to make...

"Make me king. Anora isn't an option" Whoa! Did I just say that? That deep rumbling, confident and manly voice... was it mine? I mean, Rori knows and I know that Anora indeed isn't an option. Not when we actually care for Ferelden. And that's what we are here for, right? Not for our own selfish desires but for being the heroes Duncan believed us to be when he chose us to join the ranks of the Grey Wardens. He said, Grey Wardens do whatever is necessary to end the Blight. I don't believe that Anora is capable of dealing with an archdemon - not after she sided with her father to support his suicidal plans - suicidal for a whole nation. Maker, I do hope, Rori will understand...

"You... you seem so certain...," Rori whispers meekly.

"Shouldn't I be? You're the one who convinced me to stand up for myself. I can do this." I retort, fighting with the urge to turn this all into a joke. That I have to look Rori in the eyes while I force us apart without her even knowing what is happening, without giving her the chance to do anything about it...

"But... what makes you a better choice than Anora?"

Surely that's not a serious question?

"I may not know politics the way she does, but I know what needs to be done. I can get our armies marching toward the Blight." And hey, that's the first thing we have to get done now instead of wetting our pants because of civil wars that could or could not take place sometime in the future. A future we won't have if we don't manage to stop the archdemon. "She's already betrayed us twice. Who knows if she'd even truly help us now? She could have us banished as soon as you hand her the crown."

"So... you're ready to be king?" I really wish Rori wouldn't sound as surprised as she does. It was her who put me through a blasted campaign and kept telling me how awesome a king I could be.

"As ready as anyone ever is, I suppose." Doesn't sound convincing, does it? Just say yes, Alistair! "Which is to say yes - I'm ready."

Rori nods slowly. She doesn't look happy. Not at all. Straightening herself, she declares: "I can make my choice now."

"As the arbiter of this dispute, what is your decision? Who will lead Ferelden?" Eamon asks and all
the nobles crane their necks to get a better look at the small ginger standing there in the middle of the hall.

I can feel Anora's glare. Her eyes are boring into the back of my head and when I turn, that look on her face chills me to the bone. I never liked her watching me... but this time, her stare is like a dagger... one of those with a jagged blade and smeared with poison... Maker! This woman scares me and the lopsided grin I offer as a reply freezes on my face and turns into a grimace.

"Ano..." Rori begins, then frowns and falls silent when Anora steps forward triumphantly, casting one last scathing look at me.

"What? Go on, you were about to say my name," Anora snaps when she finds Rori stares at her slack-jawed. The poor girl looks as if she has seen a ghost.

"Alistair..." Rori gasps instead. "Alistair shall be king." Eamon inhales, spreads his arms and opens his mouth... and that's when Rori - defiance written all over her face - blurs out: "And I will rule beside him!" She doesn't address me. She's talking to Eamon, her words daring him to object.

"Really? You will?" I stammer, feeling like someone just pulled a rug from under my feet. I'm not sure if I'm floating or falling. "This is where I wake up usually. Or everyone points and laughs because I have no clothes on."

Eamon is as surprised as I am. But far less delighted. He can't outmanoeuvre her anymore now after he accepted her decision right in front of the Landemeet.

I shake my head no when Eamon turns to me furiously. I didn't say a word. Rori must have been eavesdropping. Cunning little beast.

Seems Ferelden will have to wait for a royal baby for a very long time.

I do have to talk to Rori as soon as possible. And then I better make up for my crappy reaction on her engaging herself to me...

Andraste's flaming sword! We are going to be king and queen of Ferelden!

Sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it?

I wonder, if ours ends with 'and they all lived happily ever after'. 
"Anora, the Landsmeet has decided against you. You must now swear fealty to our king and relinquish all claims to the throne for yourself and your heirs." Eamon demands while I still try to get used to Just Alistair being King Alistair now, well... soon... after the coronation. Somehow I imagined there would be a difference but I still feel like a fool.

"If you think I will swear that oath, Eamon, you know nothing of me," Anora snaps, straightening as she holds her head high. Trying to play the martyr now, huh?

Awesome! My ass hasn't yet touched the throne and already I got a problem. And of course it's Anora. She just doesn't know when to stop. Maker! This woman is a pain in the neck.

"Anora, you kept telling everybody and their dog how much you care about this nation," Rori groans, equally unnerved. "Now walk it like you talk it, for pity's sake!"

"We cannot leave Ferelden in a state of civil war," Eamon reasons. "We must have unity. If she will not swear fealty to you, Alistair, and renounce her claim to the throne, she is a threat to us all."

And spotlight on Alistair!

Doom!

DOOM!

Maker's Breath, what does he expect me to do? Kill her? She would still haunt me when dead. Unlike her father she hasn't committed any crimes I could prove to justify her death. And do I want to be that kind of king who kills a woman to secure his own power? Is this the only and best solution for Ferelden?

I mean, we still have the archdemon breathing down our necks, yes? And I will be in the forefront when it finally pokes its ugly head out of its hiding place...

"Put her in the tower for now," I say grimly. "If I fall against the Blight she can have her throne. If not, then we'll see."

A few days in Fort Drakon should help her to reconsider and - hopefully - change her mind.

"You would give me a chance for the throne after all this?" Anora gasps in surprise, finally giving up her martyr performance.

"I said, if I fall, Anora," I correct her before she can get any strange ideas. "If I fall the throne falls to you. I won't kill you while there's a chance that could happen. Somebody has to treat this Blight seriously." And it really is a joke that this somebody is awkward foolish Alistair.

"That is uncharacteristically wise of you," Anora says slowly after a moment of stunned silence. Rori right next to her bounces up and down, beaming from ear to ear with blatant pride. Then she nudges Anora, going: "Told you so!"

"Yes, well, don't let it get around," I mutter gruffly. "I have a reputation."
When Anora is lead away by the guards she turns to cast one last glance at me over her shoulder. It's none of her icy glares but a puzzled look crowned by a thoughtful frown.

Next I get a first impression of what it means to be king.

I hold my first speech and despite the feeling of looming doom get through it without my tongue tumbling over the words that spill out of my mouth. I hardly realize what I say but it can't be totally wrong as everybody cheers and Eamon wears that utterly surprised look of a man who bought a pig in a poke and against all odds finds it's a truffle pig.

Seems I'm seriously compromising my own reputation. Blast! And I worked so hard for years and years to acquire it!

Then the nobles come forward, testing their waters with their new monarch. The most important question is not: How are you going to defeat the archdemon, your Highness? Nope. It is: What are you planning to do with Gwaren, your Highness?

Andraste's flaming sword! How about we wait who survives the blasted Blight and then decide who becomes teyrn?

After I get rid of them, there's Eamon chewing my ears off about the heir I don't have and won't have thanks to Rori.

Hello!? Blight? Archdemon? First things first, please!

I'd also very much appreciate if I finally could talk to my future wife and find out what the Fade came over her! I expected a whole lot of things to happen. An engagement wasn't on my list, though.

Rori sits on our bed. Knees pressed together, she rubs her hands nervously on her thighs, watching me carefully with wide round eyes. "Hey," she greets me meekly, offering a shy smile. There's nothing much left of her kick-ass-attitude now.

"So, strange story," I say, coming to a halt right in front of her, arms crossed in front of my chest. "Tell me if you heard this one: This fellow is made king and then gets engaged all at the same night."

"You aren't angry, are you?" Rori asks timidly. "I... I didn't know what to do... I... I rather would have dropped it all on Anora but that expression on her face... I've seen it before when we crowned Behlen. And we both know what happened to Harrowmont..."

"Yeah, poor old Harry," I mutter. Behlen didn't waste any time with his opponent's execution. It was the very first order he gave after his coronation. "Hey, wait! You didn't want to make me king? I was second choice after Anora!?!"

"I didn't want to lose you!" Rori exclaims desperately. "But... when I realized Anora would have killed you, I had to make you king...please don't be angry!"

"I'm actually fine with becoming king," I hear myself admit. Now there's no turning back, I feel strangely at peace with my new situation. "I've had some time to come to terms with that." It's mostly Rori's influence. She always believed in me and gave me confidence. She taught me to stand up for myself more often and trust my own judgement. Anora made it easier, too. As long as I still believed her to be a good and wise queen, I would have never thought I could in any way be a better choice. Once I got to know her... Hey, I can hardly be much worse, can I? I don't say it comes easily now. I am still scared out of my mind when I think about all the responsibility... but I also see the possibilities to make a change... "I suppose there's some good I could even do."
Okay...," Rori mumbles, kneading her fingers. "So that's the king thing..."

"Well, yes, I suppose I'm more curious about... you know, the engagement." That really hit me like a hammer.

"Sorry!" Rori blurts out, stumbling over her own words. "I know I should have asked you... at least given you a warning... but... I didn't plan this, you know... I wanted us to stay Grey Wardens and... be together... when that didn't work... it was the only way I could think of that wouldn't tear us apart..."

She wrings her hands, looking so utterly devastated that being annoyed with her becomes absolutely impossible. I was more stunned by her declaration anyway, maybe a bit huffed that she took that decision away from me - at least it made it much easier for me to tell Eamon to kiss my royal butt when he demanded I shoud dump Rori anyway.

"Rori! Rori!" I kneel down and take her hands in mine to calm her down. "Hey, don't cry! I'm not angry. I... I like the idea but... are you sure?"

"Am I sure I want to marry you?" Rori wipes her snotty nose at her sleeve. She's still rather meek but there is no hesitation in her voice when she answers: "Yes! Yes, of course I am sure! I love you."

"Ah, I guess, that saves me having to ask then." I chuckle, handing my handkerchief to her. "Whew!" Pause. "They'll expect an heir, but you already know, don't you? And with the taint in our blood... for two Grey Wardens having an heir might not be possible."

Rori nods, hanging her head. She at least has the decency to be ashamed. She's aware of what she has done, of how her utterly selfish decision can endanger the future of Ferelden. It's a decision I would have never made... not when securing the succession to the throne is essential to prevent another civil war ripping my kingdom appart... Oh! Whoa! Having strange kingly thoughts already.

"Well, it won't be for the lack of trying!" Rori mutters sullenly, pouting as she straightens to provocingly lock eyes with me.

"That's an excellent point. Good thing we got started when we did, hm?" I laugh and finally earn myself a timid and rather sheepish smile before she casts her eyes down again and hides behind a curtain of unruly red curls.

"You once said we do what is right no matter the cost," Rori mutters sadly, staring down at my hands holding hers so small and cold. "You would have done what I couldn't... didn't want to do and broken my and your heart for the sake of this nation..."

"Rori, I..."

"... because you are a true king," she whispers hoarsely.

Err... o-okay... And all that despite me keeping Eamon's plans a secret? True king? Hardly. More like spineless coward. I never found the courage to tell her the truth, hoping the problem would solve itself. Instead Rori solved it Rori-like. Maker! I feel like a complete jerk!

I tenderly caress the side of her face, gently lifting her chin to make her meet my eyes. Hers are red, puffy and bleared by tears. She sniffles, wipes her nose at her sleeve, her expression caught in between frowardness and ruefulness.

There she is in all her glorious imperfection. She is as stubborn as a mule, ruthlessly selfish, shockingly blunt and defiant... and - Maker's Breath! - I love her! Being near her ignites a warmth in
my heart that makes me feel like floating in a huge bouncy bubble of foolish happiness.

Instead of an answer, I lean forward to gently kiss her. Maker! I should have done this ages ago! Like the very moment when she announced our engagement and made a dream come true I didn't dare to dream. It's so overwhelming, I still can't believe it's going to happen... Well, we better finish the archdemon first. Corrupted dragons are terrible wedding crasher...

With a sigh of relief Rori pounces me, melts into the kiss as she wraps her arms around my neck and presses against me with passionate urgency. Her nimble fingers unfasten my armour while mine pull at the ties of her blouse. Impatiently I just rip it open when Rori tosses the metal pieces of my armour aside unceremoniously. My pants land in the cold fireplace, my smallclothes get caught in the chandelier, her boots almost knock over the lantern on the bedside table...

This is the first time we make love to each other ever since Fort Drakon. Once we are both starkers, rolling around on the carpet, Rori wavers between her usual boldness and an intimidated abashment, mirroring her confusion and insecurity.

Awkward.

And then she suddenly shrugs out of my embrace and crawls away backwards, and I feel I mustn't let her go or I will lose her. Too much went wrong between us lately, tearing open a gap that becomes wider with every passing day. The unexpected engagement didn't make things better, quite the contrary. Maker! It was all playful and carefree, a sanctuary we built for ourselves while everything around us fell apart. "Rori! Stay!" I reach out for her but all I can get hold off is her big toe. So I sit there, looking foolish as I hold on to her toe as if my life depended on it. And she sits there, staring at me wide eyed... and then she wiggles her toes and I really don't know what gets into me but it's all so silly that I can't help grinning... and she frowns in return, not like she's annoyed but as if she wonders what I'm up to next and before I can even think about it, I go:

"Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
Catch a ginger by her toe.
If she squeals, don't let her go,
Eeny, meeny, miny, moe."

And oh how she squeals! And she kicks me right in the face so hard I collapse backwards on the carpet. Serves me right for tickling her! The next fifteen minutes I spend with a moist cloth pressed to my bleeding nose, squeezing it testingly to figure out if it's broken, and my still giggling ginger fussing over me. Though my nose is quite swollen, the only thing broken is the tension between us. And once the bleeding has stopped I find myself lying in bed with my beautiful woman riding me. Maker! She has a way to make up for almost knocking me out...

Leaning forward she captures my lips for a teasingly light kiss until I entangle my fingers with her hair and urge her to part her lips for me. She rocks her hips in a slow rhythm while we kiss with passionate tenderness. When she breaks the kiss, she straightens, pulling me to a sitting position as well. Merciful Andraste... there's not many things Zevran and I agree upon, but a woman's bosom for sure is there to be worshipped... especially if it's as beautiful as Rori's...

Her arms wrap around my neck, mine around her waist as she slowly rocks her hips against mine. I watch her beautiful face, her dark eyes hazy with lust and love. Her lips slightly parted, she moans softly as I move inside of her, her tight velvet heat clenching around me. Oh merciful Andraste!

It's been a week and with all the drama I haven't realized until now how much I missed making love to her. Those moments when nothing else matters but Rori and I, when our bodies unite and there's blissful oblivion... I couldn't even spell my name correctly that very moment! Maker, I don't even
remember I have a name... Thankfully Rori usually reminds me of it at the peak of her own pleasure...

"Alistair!" Gasping my name she collapses on top of me, her breathing ragged, her bosom heaving against my chest. Grinning stupidly, I nuzzle her neck as I wrap my arms around her. I could drift off to sleep now happily and with all my worries and sorrows forgotten for the moment. But Rori rolls off me, rising her legs over her head while she pulls the pillow from under my head, then stuffs it under her up-lifted hindquarters.

"What in the name of the Maker are you doing?" I laugh.

"Getting pregnant," she explains, her face as bright red as a tomato from the uncomfortable position.

"Have you been talking to Zevran again?"

"Not about this... That's what Nan kept telling Oriana to do. So that all the... uhm... slimy stuff... you know, flows into the womb... I think... kinda... Someone always clapped their hands over my ears when Nan offered advice on that matter."

I doubt some gymnastic exercises will make a difference. What we need is magic. Or a miracle. Probably both. "I suppose that's something we only have to deal with later," I yawn. "My coronation isn't going to happen for some time yet. And we still got the darkspawn to fight. Arl Eamon has left for Redcliff. And he said not to dawdle but to follow him as soon as possible. Actually I walked into our bedroom with the very intention to talk to Rori and then walk straight out of that room again - without any delay - and depart for Redcliff. Now, that worked out just the way I planned, huh? "He says the armies have almost finished gathering there."

There's different strategies to think about... How to defend Redcliff? How to evacuate the people? The treasury is almost empty. I have no blasted idea how to pay the soldiers. Eamon says this will be a problem we will soon have to deal with.

All this is so overwhelming and when I talked to Eamon about it, it was all weighing me down. Here, lying in bed starkers and with Rori balancing her naked ass high up in the air, it is pretty hard to concentrate on anything but the image of me shoving her legs over her head and mounting her.

"We should go to Redcliff as soon as possible," I add lamely, ogling Rori's hindquarters and the pink slit of her womanhood, glistening moistly... Blast it! Somebody has to treat this Blight seriously, right? So, concentration, Alistair! Every hour can be essential now. Riordan claims the archdemon has left its underground lair. He expects it to reach Redcliff any time now.

"A few more hours won't hurt," Rori grins and wiggles her ass. I try with a scolding frown but can't help grinning, happy that she's back to being Rori to a T. "Think about Ferelden's future!"

"I am thinking about Ferelden's future! If we don't deal with the archdemon soon, it will get cranky. Nobody wants that."

"Alistair! If you don't deal with me soon, I will get cranky," Rori pouts. Next her pillow hits me straight in the face. "Nobody wants that. Least of all you!"

"Ow! My nose! Please be gentle with my royal organ..." I complain and slap her still nicely presented buttocks in return. Rori mews lowly in reply, licking her lips. Oh, that upwards glance she shoots me!

"Oh, believe me, your Highness, I will be very gentle," she purrs. Circling her hand around my shaft, she tugs teasingly.

"Business before pleasure," I say sternly - okay, I guess, that huge wide grin plastered across my face kinda destroys the impression. No wonder Rori just snorts, staring pointedly at my rather prominent erection.

"Oh well, I suppose a king gotta do what a king gotta do!" I sigh as I position myself between her legs, running my hands up and down her thighs. She rests them on my shoulders when I pull her against me. "For Ferelden!"

"For king and country!" Rori giggles.

Chapter End Notes

I never liked how Alistair just marches in after the Landsmeet, has this very short conversation with his soon-to-be wife and then just leaves without even kissing her. That's just not an appropriate reaction to the woman he is in love with. Just my humble opinion.
Before you get confused, wondering: What the fuck is she doing?! That's not how it is in the game!

Let's take a look at the map of Ferelden!

There we see that there's several hundred miles/kilometers between Redcliffe and Denerim. A distance that an army with infantry and cavalry and whatever else they drag along cannot cross within a day. Riordan's revelation probably only comes shortly before the battle. And Morrigan says that the Dark Ritual has to take place at the eve of the final battle.

So unless Captain Kirk and his crew stop by to beam Roristair and Co. to Denerim, the game events that happen in Redcliffe cannot happen in Redcliffe but in a warcamp outside Denerim. Right?

Introduces Teagan's and Eamon's cousin from the Free Marches (World of Thedas Vol. 2)

"Seriously?" Rori groans when Riordan greets us with the news that the archdemon has left its lair and is leading the horde towards Denerim as soon as we arrive at Redcliffe - after a hurried four day journey from Denerim. "We should have stayed in bed," she mutters under her breath, earning herself a scathing glare from Eamon. "What? Then at least we would be in Denerim now! Would have saved us running around half of Ferelden - again."

"She has a point, you know," Cador Aurum laughs at the Arl's sour expression. The tall warrior is Teagan's and Eamon's cousin from the Free Marches. Teagan - Maker bless him! - has formed some alliances and organized some assistance from our neighbours. So next to the banners of Ferelden, those of the Aurums and Trevelyans will be present on the battlefield.

"We cannot skip out on Denerim," I insist. "We at least have to try." Our odds are long - but I will not abandon my people like Loghain did so often, acting as a master of life and death.

"I agree with Alistair... or should I call you Your Majesty?" Riordan says, bowing slightly.

"Rather not. Not yet anyway," I mutter uncomfortably. Yes, I know, I should get used to it! But it all seems so far away and unreal when I don't even know if I will live to see tomorrow.

"Only Grey Wardens can defeat the archdemon and end the Blight," Riordan explains. "Without the Grey Wardens Denerim will fall."

"How many are you? Three?" Cador inquires, sizing up our unimpressing numbers. "Teagan said only a miracle could save Ferelden. No liar, he. No wonder you agreed on marrying the Trevelyan girl, Teagan. Desperate measures, huh?"

"You are married to her sister, Cador," Teagan points out teasingly.
"See, I know what I'm talking about." Cador wraps his arm around Teagan's shoulder and beams at his cousin. "Now, ain't you lucky that I am here? Just like the old days."

"What's so special about us that only we can kill an archdemon?" Rori asks suspiciously while the bickering between Cador and Teagan goes to and fro.

"So you do not know?" Riordan gasps. He looks... shocked? Why does he look shocked? "Of course not. You are only recruits. Duncan wouldn't have told you."

"Uh-oh, we will not like this, will we?" I groan. Great. Just great. Duncan and his blasted 'You'll see'.

"I will give you all the information you need in time before the battle," Riordan assures us. If this is meant to depel our concerns, then I'm afraid it so doesn't work. "For now, we should prepare our departure."

"We so will not like this," Rori agrees gloomily.

Since our whole army, dwarves, Dalish, mages and the united Fereldan nobility is in Redcliffe, the archdemon and its horde will meet a city that is not prepared for such an assault. A city that is cramned with refugees next to its inhabitants. We have to return as quickly as possible - and still won't be there in time. A whole army doesn't travel as fast as a small group on horseback. Warnings have been sent to Denerim and our reinforcement at Warden's Peak. The Mac Eanraig fleet can reach the city faster than the marching army, but we all realize that won't be enough. Maker preserve us! I do hope we will find anything of Denerim left when we get there.

"And I thought leaving Amethyne in Denerim would keep her safe." Rori says in utter frustration as she mounts her horse when we leave with the whole army in tow in the morning after our arrival. She is worried and so am I - well, actually everybody. But neither she nor I are allowed to show it. The king and queen are responsible for the morals and that's why we are busy talking to banns and commoners alike, radiating confidence when I'm actually scared right out of my mind and feel sick to my stomach whenever I think about the upcoming battle. I finally get an impression of how Cailan had to feel in Ostagar. By the time we set up camp, I have a cramp in my face from all the forced smiles and am hoarse from all the reassuring speeches.

Maker! I am grateful when I can finally hide in my tent - the kingsize version instead of that tiny smelly one I'm used to - with Rori. I'm just about to destract myself and her from all the despair, fear and stress when Eamon and Teagan appear. "Your Highness, as designated king you have a special responsibility as an inspiring model. The degeneration of morals is nothing you should set an example of," Eamon insists, stopping dead as he catches sight of Rori and me. "Same applies to you, mylady."

I stand there caught in the act with both my palms resting on Rori's breasts - beneath her blouse - and gawk at him stupidly as my face goes bright red. Rori with her hand down the front of my pants looks equally foolish. We jump apart and I quickly remove my hands, but stepping away from Rori proves impossible as she does not let go of me. It's not as if she wasn't trying, though. Her bracelet has gotten caught in the fabric of my pants. Typical!

"Huh? Err... Eamon! Teagan! Uhm... nice... tent, don't you think?" I stammer, blushing so violently I wouldn't be surprised if my ears glowed red in the dark. Rori - the colour of her face matching her hair - is on her knees with her hand still stuck in my pants while she tries to pull the breeches open with her second hand and teeth...

Doom!
"Err... I don't think she is ready to leave...," I mutter, squeezing my eyes shut in the hope Eamon and Teagan will be gone when I open them again. They aren't. Just my luck.

"Blast! The Fade with you, Eamon!" Rori snaps, wiggling her hands around inside my pants to get hold of the fastening of her bracelet. If embarrassment could kill I'd have died a thousand deaths by now. "I won't go anywhere. And I give a fucking damn what people think. Stop putting your nose in my business."

Whoa! Rori's butting heads with Arl Eamon. And all that while her hand clenches around my most private parts. And now everybody is staring at me, expecting me to choose between my advisor and my betrothed. Marvellous!

"Team Rori," I squeak.

"She really got you by the balls, your Highness," Teagan chuckles, dragging Eamon away while he is still dumbfounded. By the Arl's expression I dare say he wished someone would give this impertinent little boldface a spanking for her backtalk. He can count on me there. I will gladly take over this task.

"Yeah, the old ball and chain, you know," I grin sheepishly, wincing when Rori's grip tightens around me. "Not letting me go anywhere," I press through gritted teeth.

Rori manages to free her hand the very moment when we're alone again. The bracelet is still dangling from my flies. Why do things like that always happen to us?

"Awkward," I mutter, grinning sheepishly at my partner in crime who - to my utter dismay - rises from her kneeling position.

"Old ball and chain, huh?" Rori huffs, arms crossed in front of her chest.

"The most ravishing ornament I can wish for," I whisper softly as I lean in to steal a chaste kiss from her lips that gets returned with an exuberant passion that is anything but chaste. Next we tumble onto our makeshift bed together, hands all over each other, tongues intertwined in a sensuous dance. The softness of her voluptuous curves presses against my firm frame when our bodies move in the accelerating rhythm of our love making. Our noises of passion are our own hymn of love and lust - and the final crescendo is rewarded with a thundering applause and Morrigan's complaint: "Keep it down, you fools!"

Oh... haha! Awkward!

Whenever I am with Rori I tend to forget my surroundings... like a gigantic warcamp with thousands of soldiers outside the little island of illusionary privacy that is our tent.

No wonder I get greeted with a whole lot of wide, knowing smirks the next morning as soon as I leave my kingsize tent. The guards positioned at the entrance even wink at me and give me thumbs up. All flustered and flushed, I smile foolishly in return, wishing we were in Denerim already and I could kill some darkspawn.

Not that I get much time paying attention to the whispering behind my back. I get cornered by Bann Ceorlic while I still wolf down my porridge. Same time Riordan offers some advice on the battle and Eamon - still rather huffed - lectures me on discipline and duty... My head is spinning and it's no surprise that I hardly listen since I watch Rori fighting with her leather pants. She stumbles out of the tent backwards as she hops around, pulling forcefully at the garment to close the breeches over the
curve of her belly. Seems someone has put on some weight, huh? No wonder with all the food she keeps wolfing down.

Rori still hasn't managed to close her pants when Morrigan appears with a mug in her hand. I can't hear what she says but her words have Rori freeze. Slack-jawed she gawks at the witch and shakes her head at whatever Morrigan is explaining. Her expression turns from confused to utterly shocked and her hands fly to her belly, resting there for a moment before she rakes her fingers through her hair, shaking her head no desperately. During the conversation that follows - it's mostly Morrigan talking - Rori becomes paler with every word spoken.

Morrigan shoves the mug at Rori, the ginger staring at the steaming liquid as if there were three-headed worms swimming in it. Her mission fulfilled, the witch saunters away, leaving behind a visibly shaken woman and a mug.

One hand pressed to her belly, the other clenched around the mug, Rori stands there blinking back the tears that sting in her eyes. With shaking hands, she lifts the mug to her lips, the hand resting on her belly fisting into the garment of her blouse. Then she lowers the mug again, repeating her attempt to drink several times. She is trembling so badly, she keeps spilling some of the liquid. In the end she pours the brew onto the ground, dropping the mug as if it was red-hot.

All the while I try to get to her to find out what's bothering her but it proves impossible to shake off the men talking to me. Whenever I excuse myself, they come up with yet another super-important topic that demands my attention. When I finally get rid of them, Rori seems to have recovered. She's still ashen but the trembling has stopped.

"Are you alright?" I ask worriedly, earning myself a small smile and a nod. "What did Morrigan give you?"

"A... remedy for my sickness," Rori croaks hesitantly.

"Then why didn't you drink it?" Her behaviour makes no sense to me. How can a healing brew upset her that much?

"I didn't like the side-effects," Rori says evasively, hiding her face behind a curtain of red curls. "They were... quite drastic."

"Are you ill?" I ask, following her into the tent where she begins rummaging through her luggage for different pants.

"No! No, I'm not ill." she says forcefully, then muttering under her breath. "Blast! I will have to ask Wade to ease my armour. Can't fight the archdemon without any pants."

"It could cause some distraction," I chuckle.

"I doubt it would be the archdemon to find itself distracted," Rori retorts, poking my ribs.

"Touché!" I laugh and then we stand there, foolishly gawking at each other and I can't get rid of the impression that I'm missing something. Rori bites her lower lip, inhales deeply and kneads her fingers nervously. "Rori?"

"Alistair," she begins, pressing her hands to her belly again. "The timing couldn't be worse... Oh blast! How to say this? Uhm... I... I am..."

"Your Highness!" Arl Wulff drones as he bursts into the tent, his appearance shutting Rori up rather effectively. "May I have a word?"
Oh bloody blast it! No, you may not have a word... but there I already get dragged along by him and several other nobles. For the rest of the day there's always someone bothering either me or Rori or both with politics and I show interest in things I couldn't care about less. We make haste, pushing man and beast to their limits. Everybody knows what's at stake although I doubt many of them realize what evil they will have to face.

When I finally get the chance to talk to Rori I am so tired I can hardly keep my eyes open. We just crawl into our tent and collapse on the bed, not much caring that we still wear our boots and clothes. Taking off the armour already proves quite a challenge and I just drop the pieces where I stand.

"So what's wrong?" I murmur, yawning as I snuggle against my beloved fellow Warden. I've wondered about her encounter with Morrigan all day long. There was something she wanted to tell me. It sounded important.

"Well... the heir problem, you know..." Rori begins hesitantly as she draws patterns on my chest with her index finger.

"Rori, really, that's nothing you should worry about now," I mumble, already half asleep. "After the Blight, well, we'll see. The fight with the archdemon already gives me a headache. Don't need to add any more worries about a baby."

"Oh... but..." Rori says right before sleep overpowers me.

When I ask her the next morning, apologizing that I passed out on her, she claims there's nothing of importance. "Stress, exhaustion. I overreacted when Morrigan offered to... help me, that's it. I have to talk to Kardol. He and his men are worried that they could fall into the sky. See you later." And of she rides, leaving me alone with - Sten.

Awesome. At least I won't have to converse.

And that's when His Grumpiness goes: "You accepted your duty. I didn't expect this,"

"I am full of surprises. Don't let it get around. I got a reputation," I mutter, earning myself one of those typical Sten glares. Yeah, I'm a moron. "So I suppose once I'm actually king I could end up in negotiations with the Qunari one day," I intend to break the uncomfortable silence. It can't hurt to learn a bit more about the Qun or whatever they call their weird philosophy.

"My people do not negotiate."

"What do you mean?" I wonder. "They negotiated a peace treaty after the war, and as far as I know they've kept to its terms."

"They signed a piece of paper. But only because they knew that you believed in it."

"And what is the difference between that and negotiating?"

"They stopped fighting for their own reasons. And they will resume it again, one day. The agreement means nothing to them."

They fooled us?

Charming.

"But I thought you said your people believed in honour." I am utterly confused now. All this talk about honour and duty, what is it worth when the Qunari don't give a damn about it?
"They do. The honour of the Qunari is what will bring our warships back to your shores."

What!? But... oh! Qunari! I will never understand them. Thankfully darkspawn are far simpler.

"Well, thanks for the warning, I guess," I mutter. Maker! Qunari are creepy! No wonder the archdemon didn't choose Par Vollen to make its appearance. The Qunari probably scared it away.

"Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile," I intone in a monotonous voice when Rori returns.

"What?"

"Nevermind."

It's the last night before the battle. We pushed ourselves to our limits to reach Denerim as fast as possible, realizing that every hour could be essential. Utterly exhausted, we have set up the warcamp on the plains outside Denerim for a last time. The capital is not yet in sight which is certainly much better for the morals. The soldiers are scared already, we do not need them to watch a burning city crammed with darkspawn and contemplate their own fate.

Tomorrow we will reach the city, tomorrow we will either succeed or perish.

Now, ain't I looking forward to that?

Well, actually, I am. Looking forward to it, I mean. Not like I am giddy about dying. But the pressure has been weighing me down for days and I wish for an end... preferably one where the archdemon is dead and I am still alive. And Rori of course.

She's been uncharacteristically silent but so have I - when I didn't have to shout out moral-boosting-slogans like a fishwife praising her goods at the market.

It's the calm before the storm. The war camp lies quiet, only hushed whispers can be heard from time to time - and that's mostly prayers. It makes me want to scream to get rid of the tension pressing against my ribcage. I know I should rest but sleep is the last thing on my mind. Even finding comfort in Rori's presence seems impossible tonight. I am almost glad when Riordan summons Rori and me for a last briefing.

He meets us on a small hill outside the warcamp where nobody can be big-eared - accidentally or on purpose. A cold wind chases dark clouds across the sky, grey with a reddish glow seeping into the increasing darkness. It looks as if it's bleeding. Just to top it we witness a red moon rising when the sun finally sets.

"I'm scared," Rori whispers hoarsely when we approach Riordan, standing still as a statue, his eyes distant and full of sorrow. "Feels like being lead to the slaughter. Like when you took me to the old temple in Ostagar for my Joining."

"And you were the only one to survive," I say, intertwining my fingers with hers when she reaches for my hand. "That's a good omen, right?"

"From your lips to the Maker's ears."

"You're both here. Good," Riordan turns to face us, his expression anxious but grave."You're new to the Grey Wardens and you may not have been told how an archdemon is slain. I need to know if that is so."
"You mean there's more to it than just, say, chopping off its head?" That actually sounds rather fatal to me.

"Burn its remains and scatter its ashes?" Rori suggests hopefully.

"So it is true. Duncan had not yet told you. I had simply assumed," Riordan sighs. He is a man with a heavy burden that he is about to drop on us. "Tell me, have you ever wondered why the Grey Wardens are needed to defeat the darkspawn?"

"Are we here for guesswork?" Rori snaps irritatedly, discomposed by the severity of Riordan's behaviour. Her fingers tighten around mine - but it can't hide she's trembling.

"The archdemon may be slain as any other darkspawn," Riordan explains patiently. "But should any other than a Grey Warden do the slaying, it will not be enough. The essence of the beast will pass through the taint to the nearest darkspawn and will be reborn anew in that body. The dragon is thus all but immortal." He pauses to let that piece of information sink in. Oh Blast! Rori was right, we are not going to like this. Not at all. "But if the archdemon is slain by a Grey Warden its essence travels into the Grey Warden, instead," Riordan goes on once he is sure we understand.

"Eww... this doesn't sound healthy..." Rori mutters. With her hands pressed to her belly, she's slightly bent forward as if she was about to get violently sick. Can't blame her. I don't feel any better at the moment.

"The darkspawn is an empty soulless vessel but a Grey Warden is not," Riordan says, his voice calm. "The essence of the archdemon is destroyed and so is the Grey Warden."

"Meaning... the Grey Warden who kills the archdemon... dies?" I ask, surprised at how composed I sound.

"Yes." Riordan confirms. "Without the archdemon the Blight ends. It is the only way."

Strangely his confession doesn't make me despair. Somehow I have always felt it's how it would end. How it has to end. I can see the path laid out for me clearly now, the duty that demands the sacrifice of one life for a greater good. There's a serenity taking hold of me, giving me the strength to accept my fate.

Rori - well, that's a different story.

"No!" she cries, lunging herself at Riordan, shoving him and drumming her small fists at his chest.

"I am sorry. But it is the only way," Riordan repeats calmly as he grabs her wrists to stop her. Rori just kicks his shin instead.

"Whoa! Rori! Calm down. There's nothing we can do about this now," I soothe her - rather unsuccessfully - when pulling her away from Riordan. She fights against my arms locked around her, kicks and screams.

"That's... that's not fair! I do not want to die! Not like that! Not now!" She bursts into tears. "You bastard! They never told us! They never even gave us a warning! I cannot... You cannot make me! I'm pre..." The word gets stuck in her throat and with horrified realization she gasps: "There's only three of us to kill this thing." Her legs don't support her anymore and she sinks to the ground, a picture of misery.

I'm not sure what I expected of her... certainly not to break down like this. It's quite unsettling. Sure, Rori's strength originates from her stubborn belief that she will have a future. Usually she manages to
keep cool and just give things a try. She's an expert in cheating death - if anybody survives this Blight, then it's Rori. I will make sure of this - cost what it may.

I sit down next to her, wrapping her in my arms and pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head. "Hey, chin up when the water's up to your neck. We'll get through this together."

Rori stares at me as if I lost my mind. "But... there's only three of us!"

"Exactly!" I cheer. "The odds are in our favour that we get stomped into the ground by an ogre or fried by the spell of an emissary before we even get to see the archdemon."

"Oh Maker..." Rori groans. "I think... I'm going to be sick..." No sooner said than done!

"In Blights past, when the time came the eldest of the Grey Wardens would decide which amongst them would take that final blow. If possible the final blow should be mine to make," Riordan explains softly, crouching next to her. He's offering hope where there isn't any. But Rori is desperate. She clutches at straws.

"But if I fail the deed falls on you. The Blight must be stopped now or it will destroy all of Ferelden before the rest of the Grey Wardens can assemble. Remember that." Like Duncan Riordan is a good judge of character, it seems. There's no harsh words. No lecture about duty. When he speaks, he does not preach though his tone is urgent.

Rori nods slowly. "Point taken." She's a whiter shade of pale, a haunted look has settled in her eyes. I have to help her back to her feet and lead her to the warcamp. She's brooding, her mind racing to find a solution. I already know what she will suggest when she abruptly stops in the looming shadows of the first tents at the outskirts of the warcamp.

"We... we could run away...," she breathes. "Go someplace where nobody knows us..."

"Good plan, we could go to Orlais, live in sin and eat cake until the darkspawn finally catches up towards us." We both know this won't happen. I couldn't live like this, and despite her fear and despair gnawing at her, Rori knows she couldn't either.

"Our luck and all the other Grey Wardens there die of food poisoning and again we are the only ones to deal with that oversized lizard," Rori sighs, hugging herself. "I'm sorry, Alistair. Everybody wants me to be a hero... but all I wish for is to stay alive and be with you. Oh Maker! Listen to me! Enough whining! Doesn't get me anywhere, right? Better make it a show they will never forget and face the curtain with a bow, huh?" Offering a sheepish grin, she angrily wipes her nose at her sleeve. "I have to pee. Be right back." And off she runs and for a brief moment I wonder if I will ever see her again.

"Shame on you, Alistair!" I mutter and, turning, find myself face to face with Morrigan. So not my day... Her glare is icy and calculating as she sizes me up. My grin is foolish... well, business as usual. Some things never change.

"Where's Rori?" the witch asks coolly. I gladly point her into the right direction. Whatever will get me rid of her. I turn to leave when Morrigan calls my name: "Alistair!"

"Yeah, I know, I know, I'm a fool," I mutter, finally overpowered by Riordan's revelation. I tried not to let this happen, but Rori gave me hope that now fails. When Duncan recruited me I thought: This is it! I am home, at long last. But then Rori came along and turned my world upside down - in an adorable, exuberant, passionate way. I finally lived my life... Guess it's not worthy a king to throw himself into the mud and drum his fists on the ground and howl and bawl?

"Tis decided then, the three of you will face the archdemon? You will not wait for the reinforcement
"They would never be here in time. Even if they had griffons they would not make it. So yes, it's Rori, Riordan and I." I say tiredly, wishing Morrigan would go away. "Rori isn't exactly thrilled about this turn of events. Can't say I am."

"She's going to fight?" Morrigan gasps.

"Of course she will. She's a Grey Warden." Sure, Rori is afraid. She is desperate. But she will do what has to be done - in case she's the last one standing.

"Blast and damnation!" I watch Morrigan rush off as if the archdemon itself was on her heels. Huh? What was that all about? Maker! I really don't want to spend my last few hours worrying my brain about Morrigan.

I need some rest now. Time to contemplate. Time I hope to spend with the woman I love. But she keeps me waiting. And when she finally bursts through the entrance of our tent, completely distraught, it's nothing like I would have expected.

And there I thought that night couldn't get worse! Boy, was I wrong!
"Alistair," Rori gasps, clinging to me like I would dissolve should she let go. The sentiment is mutual so we hold each other tight and I inhale the scent of verbenas and taste the sage in her kiss, feel the softness of her curves and the warmth of her living body. Maker preserve us! Running off to Orlais suddenly doesn't sound like such a bad idea anymore.

Then Rori shrugs out of my embrace to face me, her expression determined and yet pained and sad. She opens her mouth as if to speak, then closing it again, shakes her head and begins pacing the tent, repeatedly murmuring "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" That's better though than her just standing there and staring at me, her expression blank.

Odd.

"Err... did Morrigan find you?," I make an attempt to chase the awkward tension away that looms in her brooding silence. "She asked about you earlier... and the look she gave me. That was icy, even for her." Rori hardly listens, she is muttering under her breath, having a debate with herself it seems. "Is something up?"

"Uhm... you look tired. Why don't you sit down, get a little more comfortable..." Rori snaps out of her absentminded soliloquy. She takes my hand to lead me towards the bed. "Need a hand with your boots? Or maybe not...?" she mutters when I pull free from her grasp.

"You are changing the subject. I am tired but I am not stupid. What did Morrigan want?" Templar alert! Evil witch plan ahead! I very much doubt Morrigan just sought her out to discuss the weather or have girl talk.

"You really should take a seat," Rori mumbles.

"Oh. I guess, whatever Morrigan had to say, it's big." I slump down on the edge of the cot and prepare myself for whatever is to come now. "Okay, I'm sitting. So in case the shock of your confession has me faint like a damsel, I at least won't hit my head." I heave a deep heartfelt sigh. "This is what I get for becoming king. Everyone always brings you the bad news. So what is it then? Rats running amok? Cheese supplies run low? I can take it."

"I... I love you. You know that, right?" Rori whispers. She couldn't look more guilty if I had caught her with her hand stuck in the cookie jar.

Oh blast! So it's real bad. After Riordan's revelation I thought, nothing could surprise me anymore. But I can't get rid of the impression Rori and her witch-bitch-hitch are aiming to top that.

"Could you make it sound more ominous? Tell me already." I growl, not able to tell her that I not only know she loves me but that I love her in return, an emotion that runs so deep, I right here and now make a silent promise: If it came down to Rori and I, the sacrifice would be mine...

"I need you to do something you won't like," Rori pants out her words in great distress. "Not at all.
And I am so sorry that I have to ask this of you. I wouldn't if there was another way. But there isn't and I'm desperate and...

"I don't care for the sound of that," I cut her short before she can go on making no sense at all. "What are we talking about exactly?"

Silence, Rori bites her lips, staring at me with huge round eyes, dark pools glittering with tears. Then a forced sheepish grin forms around the corners of her mouth. Someone is having a whole lot of guilt-pangs.

"Maker's Breath, Rori! Spit it out! Even Riordan didn't beat around the bush like you do. Your news can't be worse, can it?"

Rori squeezes her eyes shut, ducks her head and blurs out: "You need to sleep with Morrigan!"

Err... what!?

"It's part of a magic ritual," she adds meekly. Crouching as if she expected a thunderstorm to crash down on her, she opens one eye to glimpse at me for a reaction.

I'm dumbstruck. Did she just say what I believe she said? "Could you... repeat this please. I must have misheard. Not the part with the magic ritual. But before... It almost sounded as if... but that's just crazy!

"You need to sleep with Morrigan," Rori repeats slowly, emphasizing every single word. "The ritual she suggests... that way we won't die when slaying the archdemon. Well. it could still eat us, I guess... but this essence-wandering, that's not going to harm us."

Ooookay. So... this is a hoax, right? Right?

Of course it is! She really got me with this one. The look on my face must have been priceless.

"Cute," I laugh out loud, rising from the bed to lean casually against the post in the middle of the tent. "This is payback, right? For all the jokes."

Rori doesn't laugh, though. Just arches an eyebrow, waiting for me to figure it out. Time passes, my grin freezes on my face and it slowly begins to dawn on me...

Doom!

DOOM!

"But... you're not joking. You're actually serious."

Bad-news-contest! And the winner is: the witch-bitch! Congratulations! Your prize is a steaming hot night with a ruggedly handsome but rather unwilling young man or a box seat in the upcoming play The Archdemon vs. Alistair, a tragedy in three acts.

"Wow, be killed by the archdemon or sleep with Morrigan. How does someone make this kind of choice?" I start pacing, running my fingers through my hair nervously. Andraste's flaming sword! That's our way out? Our only hope? Oh Maker! What should I do? Not dying sounds... awesome. Especially if it involves Rori. Sleeping with Morrigan sounds... not so awesome. Quite the contrary. "You're not actually asking me this, are you?"

"Nooooo, I just dropped by for some gossip and tittle-tattle," Rori snorts. "Hey, have you heard
about that ritual that could save our lives? It's a hilarious tale. I mean, when will we ever again get the chance to die by slaying an archdemon? Who would want to miss this opportunity? That probably ranks pretty high on a scale of cool heroic deaths."

"Point taken."

"Alistair, I know this isn't easy for you." Rori says softly, following me around like a puppy as I pace. "I would perform this ritual if I could but I can't, so... yes, I am actually asking... begging you to do this..."

"What kind of ritual is this, anyway?" I stop dead, having strange visions of chopped off body parts, blood splattered everywhere and me passing as Alice afterwards.

"Okay... this is the part you will like less of all." Rori confesses.

She has to be kidding! "What can be worse than sleeping with Morrigan? What will happen to me? Are there any demons involved? Or abominations?"

"No demons, no abominations and next to getting laid nothing will happen to you," Rori explains, sounding as uncomfortable as I feel. "Err... getting laid by Morrigan isn't exactly nothing... but you know... it's nothing permanent. Physically permanent... I don't say it won't haunt you... someone you don't want to touch you, fumbling around on you... it's not easy to cope with..." She shudders, Fort Drakon written all over her face. Her terrible experience alleviates some of my distress. Rori would never ever make a... request like this carelessly. I don't say this makes me like it any better, though. "I really wouldn't suggest this if I knew any different solution..."

"Rori! The ritual!"

"I won't lie to you, okay?" Rori says hesitantly.

"I'd very much appreciate if you didn't!"

"It will produce a child."

"WHAT?!" I squeak.

Doom!

DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

"I... I must be hearing things, but are you telling me to impregnate Morrigan in some kind of magical sex rite?" I laugh nervously. It sounds quite hysterical.

"Yeah, that sums it up nicely."

Someone's making strange gurgling noises... Oh, haha, that's me! Throw me in the fire and call me Andraste! Holy. Fucking. Shit.

"This... this child... why would Morrigan want such a thing? Does she want an heir to the throne?" I am having terrible visions of a smaller demonic version of myself laughing madly as the far too big crown lopsidedly sits on his head.

"I doubt Morrigan is interested in your throne. As far as I recall it's a rather simple wooden chair with mabari carvings... The crown, now that's a different story. Morrigan likes shiny things..."

"RORI!"
"Sorry... She said she wanted to help us... me. About the child she said that you will never see it. And it will be neither darkspawn nor evil."

"Right until it marches up with an army to claim the throne, I'm sure." I mutter gloomily. Morrigan helping us? Yeah, right. Pull the other leg. "Look, even if I was willing to entertain this idea... and I am not saying I am... is this really what you want me to do? Are you sure?" Now I really do need to take a seat. My legs feel like pudding.

Rori kneels in front of me, taking my hands. "Alistair, this is not the right time for kingly thoughts. Because if you don't do this, you will be a very dead king, soon. Or a king without a queen. And don't you say a word about Riordan and how he is going to make the final blow! I am not willing to take the risk and lose you... or die myself."

Maker! This is not all about ourselves. We have a responsibility, right? Save the world and die in the process. That's what makes Grey Wardens heroes. Very dead heroes.

Rori's voice softens when she goes on. It's no more than a whispered confession. Her eyes fill with tears when she looks up at me. "So yes, I am sure," she breathes. "I cannot make you and I couldn't blame you if you refused... Please know, I would never abandon you, no matter your choice... In good times and in bad... Till death do us part... Just... I'd rather not be parted by death, you see. It's nothing I particularly look forward to. I don't want to die. I don't want to live without you either. I couldn't live without you. I couldn't endure it."

"We could die in battle, Rori, without ever getting close to the archdemon."

"Yes, but, there I can fight. I can defend myself. I have a chance. Even with the Joining I had a chance. Not with the archdemon, though... Okay, I do sound pathetic now... But... It is pathetic, isn't it? This whole situation with all the pressure and expectations and we being forced to sacrifice our lives for the sake of others and everybody going 'Sucks for you, now suck it up!'" Rori pulls at her hair frustratedly. "This all sounded much better in my mind... I could tell you, how great a king you could be, what we still could achieve in the years to come, fight the evil blabla. But truth is... and actually it's the only thing I care about... with this ritual... we could live. Together. We could be a family." Her hands fly to her belly again, a gesture she unconsciously has used often lately.

"Having the jitters?"

"W-what?" she squeaks, bamboozled by my question. I nod at her palms resting on her belly.

"Uhm... no... yes... I mean... Alistair, there's something I need you to know... I am... I..." Rori licks her lips nervously. "I love you more than words could say. And I need you to be there for me and our..." She presses her mouth shut, shaking her head. For the first time ever since she started her plea, she looks away.

"Our what?" I ask suspiciously.

"Err... our country needs you, too," Rori mutters hesitantly. Inhaling deeply, she looks up at me again, her inner turmoil displayed on her face. "There is another reason... I just can't tell you right now. But... it is important. Very important."

"Then why can't you tell me?"

"Please, Alistair, you need to trust me," Rori beseeches me with tears streaming down her face. Her voice is raw with despair, her eyes utter a silent solicitation. "You need to trust me," she sobs. "Please!"
Fine, so for impregnating Morrigan I get a life with Rori in return? That's the deal? Whew... a few minutes of ultimative discomfort treated for the happiness of an entire life with the woman I love...

Sounds like an easy decision? It is not. It's not the right thing to do. I know, Rori knows. Like she said, I can find a whole lot of excuses why I should agree to this. Someone has to rule this nation, has to chase the remaining darkspawn away, rebuild the Grey Wardens... But actually, to be honest, I just do not want to die. I want to live happily ever after with Rori - and the burden of the guilt I am going to load upon me.

"All right. I do trust you. I'll do it." I press through gritted teeth.

"Thank you," Rori whispers, hugging me tight. She's as tense as a strung bow, I'm shaken. We are about to do something terrible. And yet, now I hold her in my arms, how could I refuse? That's what I get for camboodling with my fellow Warden...

Pushing Rori away gently, I groan distraughtedly. "Where is she? Let's go and get this over with before I... change my mind."

You don't perform a wicked magical ritual in the middle of a warcamp. So Rori and I crawl out of my tent at the backside and sneak through the camp. Well, she sneaks. I clumsily trudge along. If someone catches us now, they will believe us to be deserters. This is generally true, isn't it? Our duty is to die a heroic death and we just refuse.

Rori leads me into the nearby forest, across a narrow path through the undergrowth and towards a ghostly shimmering blue light. The path leads to a clearing dominated by a stone circle, a holy monument of ancient gods long forgotten. The dark monoliths loom over a flat stone altar in the middle of the circle, their shadows dance in the flickering light of a row of floating blue flames surrounding the altar.

The perfect surrounding for an evil witch-bitch sex rite. The only thing missing is a desperate victim getting his heart ripped out and devoured... oh wait! That's going to be me! Marvellous!

Morrigan leans against one of the monoliths, regarding us coolly, as we stand there holding hands like two orphans lost in the deep dark woods. Rori's are cold. mine sweaty, our fingers intertwined so tightly it's almost painful. "Twould seem your talk is done? What did you decide?" the witch greets us.

"No, we're just taking a romantic walk in the dark," Rori dead-pans. "Alistair is here, what do you think?"

"Great. So this isn't a dream after all," I groan. "Or a joke. No dwarf or elf or granny mage hiding behind those stones? Blast!" Leliana once told me that female spiders eat their males. I really don't know why I think about that now.

"We shouldn't waste any time anymore," Morrigan says matter-of-factly. She's all business. "The ritual has to be performed at the eve of battle in the dark of night or it won't work."

"Wait!" I cry. "I want to ask about this... child. The one you... want."

"Interesting," Morrigan says slowly. "Honesty wouldn't have been my first choice."

"He at least deserves that much, don't you think?" Rori mutters. "I already feel guilty for asking him to perform this rite. It would be worse if he was here because of a lie that would have bereaved him of making his own choice."
Yeah, I know, Rori just convinced me to take part in a dark magical ritual to trick fate and I agreed because just like her I am too gutless to just die as we should, still right now I feel a pang of pride for her.

Anyway, king business... I mean, I got a responsibility for this nation, right?

"I just want to make sure that you are not going to use this - against Ferelden. That this bastard child of mine isn't going to show up some year..."

"Of that you have my word."

"Why don't I feel any better about this?" I sigh. Probably because I don't believe a single word she says. She and her mother, all they ever do is manipulate and lie. Like this ritual... where did she get it from? How would she know about our fate?

The answer begins with F and ends with Lemeth.

Now it makes sense why the old witch would rescue us from the top of the tower and send her daughter with us. She planned this! Just how could she know we would be alone, only the two of us? Did she also plan the defeat at Ostagar? Loghain's betrayal? Cailan picking me and Rori to light the beacon? Or was it part of her plan so that we would be more willing to trust Morrigan? But, she's dead, right? Nobody can come back from the dead... Right?

Blast! Paranoia won't help. It only will give me a headache...

Maker! I have to concentrate on what truly matters: Rori. I have to save her. That's why I'm here. We can solve the witch-bitch-hitch later...

"All right. Let's just get this over with." Can someone give me a drink, please?

"Rori, please allow us some privacy now." Morrigan says when Rori makes no move to actually leave.

"Oh... yes, of course..." Rori mumbles unhappily. She hugs me and I hug her in return. It feels a little awkward and stiff when it's meant for comfort. "I love you," Rori whispers, tiptoeing to brush her lips against mine, then she vanishes in the darkness of the forest and I am alone with the witch.

"Err... okay... so... it's you and I and... what do I have to do, next to, you know... this..."

"Alistair, believe me when I say you will not hate this quite as much as you believe," Morrigan says in a low purr.


"Undress please."

"What? Everything? Maker!" I hide behind a monolith to get naked, then hobble back into the stone circle, covering my most private parts with my hands.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!"

Ewww! Morrigan is starkers! Arms crossed in front of her chest but everything else really totally absolutely visible... Yeah, she is beautiful... She could be Miss Thedas and it wouldn't change a
thing.

"Now, drink this." Morrigan hands me something that looks suspiciously like a... skull.

ARRGHH! It is a skull!

I almost drop the damned thing before noticing it's a darkspawn skull. Still creepy but at least she didn't chop some poor sod's head off to get this... um... makeshift mug.

"Eww... it smells of foul eggs," I complain, sniffing at the red liquid suspiciously. "And it glows in the dark... Why does it glow in the dark?"

"Get this down already!"

Oh well, I survived the Joining. Can't be worse.

"Bah! What is this? No! Forget I asked. And why is my tongue feeling fuzzy?" I stick out my tongue and squint my eyes to see if it's looking funny. All I see is the tip of my nose. "Will the rest of me feel fuzzy, too?" The prospect of lying naked on an altar, all at Morrigan's mercy, while paralyzed by some poisonous brew is nothing to cheer me up.

"Could we handle this as pros, please? Twould make things much easier for you and me." Morrigan snaps. "Now, lie on the altar."

"But it's cold! Can't we cover it with a blanket...?"

"Stop whining."

"What about a cushion for my head?"

"Prepare yourself." I take this as a no.

"Prepare... oh..."

"I won't be doing this for you. It is not part of the ritual. Only the intercourse itself."

This is weird. I sit on an ancient stone altar in a deep dark night and try to convince myself that this is somewhat erotic when Morrigan is watching me as if I was a frog about to get dissected.

When Morrigan approaches me, I stare at her like a rabbit cornered by a snake. She crawls towards me and I shrink away...

"Oh, whoa, wait... wait! I'm not ready for this..." I hold out my hands defensively.

"Hurry up!" the witch snaps. "This night won't last forever."

"Could you... could you please not stare at me like that?" I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to summon a fantasy... something thrilling... something exciting... something... " It doesn't work." Frustratedly I stare down at the limp meat in my hands. "Err... this usually never happens... at least not with Rori. Maker! I... I can't do this."

"Alistair," Morrigan says gently as she sits down beside me, almost as if we were old buddies. We both are starkers....

That's how stupid jokes start.
A witch and a templar sit on an altar, both naked. Says the witch to the templar: "Do you love her?"

I stare at her suspiciously. Next she will bite off my head after a mannered dinner prayer. "What kind of question is that?"

"A simple one."

"What do you care? You know nothing about love."

"I do care," Morrigan says softly. I must be hallucinating. She so doesn't sound like herself. Mean, meaner, Morrigan - that's what she is. And yet she sits here next to me, staring down at the hands in her lap. She looks... vulnerable. Lost. Alone. Is it... is it possible that she dislikes this as much as I do? "Rori taught me a lot about friendship... She didn't abandon me when I learnt the truth about Flemeth and her daughters. I owe her but she never once asked for a reward. I knew about the ritual from the beginning. Tis the reason why Flemeth sent me with you. It was my mission. After her death I was free to do what I wanted. But by then I was intrigued by this young Grey Warden..."

"Yes," I whisper. "I do love her."

"Then wouldn't you want to save her life?"

"I could sacrifice myself..."

"Brilliant plan!" Morrigan claps her hands. "Now that would make her happy!"

"Point taken."

"So can we do this? For Rori?"

"Yes, we can!" Alas, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. "Blast!"

"Let me give you a hand..."

"NO!" I squeak.

"Alistair! Get a hold of yourself!"

"What do you think I am doing?" I snap, unsuccessfully rubbing around on my manhood. I wish she wasn't staring at me like that. It's awkward. And again in capital letters AWKWARD!

"Blast and damnation!" Morrigan hisses, slipping off the altar.

"Where do you go?"

"Getting Rori. If she cannot solve your little problem, nobody can."


I sit there dangling my feet when Morrigan returns with Rori, two female figures, one tall and slim with narrow hips and an apple-bosom - Zevran's dictionary of female bosom shapes - , the other petite and voluptuous, slender but with sinuous curves.

Can't say Rori looks any happier than I when she climbs onto the altar next to me. I'm still glad she's here. "Lay down and close your eyes," she says softly. "You can stop this anytime as long as the ritual hasn't begun, okay?"
I nod. I'm far too nervous to speak. My mouth is dry and my tongue feels like a furry animal that has crawled into my mouth to die there.

I can feel Rori's soft body next to mine, sense her warm breath whispering against my skin and the tickling of her hair on my face when she leans in to kiss my lips lightly. She caresses my cheeks, runs her hands across my chest, belly and arms. Then she wraps a cool cloth - silk? - around my wrists and pulls my arms over my head. My eyes snap open and with great distress I watch her tie the silken bonds around a stone post at the head of the altar.

"Err... Rori!?"

"It's for your protection during the ritual."

If this is meant to soothe my worries, it doesn't work. Getting tied up by Rori usually is quite a turn on. However not when lying on a creepy stone altar and being tied to whatever this is... was...

Formerly it must have been a statue carved into the stone but time has washed away most of the details. It must have been a woman, probably elven, her hands clasped in front of a swollen womb.

"Morrigan says this is Mythal the Protector, the elven goddess of love and patron of motherhood," Rori explains, the gentleness of her voice choked by her effort to fight back her tears.

"How fitting," I mutter.

"You rather stop?" Rori asks once I am safely tied up. I shake my head no. Well, of course I'd rather stop but the alternatives aren't thrilling either. "Okay, be a good boy and keep your eyes closed."

Obediently I close my eyes again and try to forget that I lie on the stone altar of an ancient elven goddess. It's like one of these cheesy romance novels Wynne reads. If this was only about Rori and I... then it wouldn't be that bad at all... especially not when she's kissing me the way she does...

Maker's Breath!

It starts all sweet, her nibbling and teasingly sucking my lips, her nimble fingers roaming my body, a tender caress to coax me into relaxing... I am so exhausted and tired, she almost has me doze off that way - and that's when she bites my lips and kisses me in earnest. Her tongue slides into my mouth like hot velvet, intertwining with mine in a sinuous dance. Suddenly I am wide awake, my body reacting to the sensation of her skillful fingers whispering across my skin.

It's almost unbearable to keep my eyes closed. Not touching her is even worse. I gasp when she breaks the kiss, I feel her moving next to me. Then she's on top of me, her legs planted at both sides of my body. She leans forward, the soft flesh of her bosom brushing across my face, chest, belly as she moves down, down, down...

There's a sharp stinging at my wrist the very moment Rori sucks my manhood into the hot cavern of her mouth...

"Merciful Andraste!" I moan. Something warm is tickling down my lower arm. Another sharp pricking just when Rori lazily circles her tongue around the tip of my erection. I wish I could entangle my fingers with her hair, direct her moves as she sucks me off... I wish I could watch her work me with her mouth, how her head bobs up and down as she slides her tongue across my flesh...

With the greatest effort, I keep my eyes closed, the thrill of being at her mercy rising with the tension in my loins... Something sharp and cold scratches across my chest, a pattern edged into my skin, drawing blood... guess this should disturb me... but Maker! Combined with the pleasure Rori knows to give, the cuts make for an exquisite torture...
I am blissfully mindnumbed as she pushes me on and on towards my release... I am so close when she abandons me, causing me to snarl in frustration...

Suddenly there's four hands on my body, a different weight on top of me... a stranger... Morrigan... Rori's lips press against mine... a whisper "I love you." and she's gone... A turmoil of panic and pleasure flashes through me... I open my eyes and there's pitch black darkness surrounding me.

Morrigan said the ritual has to be performed in the dark of night. No liar, she.

I cannot see the woman riding me, but I feel her, her thighs press against my hips, she sways hers in the slow ecstatic rhythm of her song, ancient words in a language long forgotten. Guttural sounds mixed with moans of pleasure, mine and hers. Unsuccessfully, I try to suppress them, feeling guilty for the pleasure this perversity causes. When Rori left me, I already was past the point of no return... I sense the power in the witchsong, how it seeps into me, filling me...

All of a sudden there's a reddish glow. First I cannot detect the source. Only when the glow becomes stronger, I see... thin threads of blood flowing away from my and Morrigan's body, mingling in narrow canals carved into the stone. The liquid travels past the ground and towards the monoliths. Only when the reddish liquid inflames the carvings on the ancient stone posts do I see it's entwined runes.

SHIT!!!

Morrigan has thrown her head back, her throat exposed, her back arched, she sways her hips mirroring the crescendo of her song. When she looks at me, her eyes have filled with blood and red tears pearl down her cheeks...

Creepy!

Mental note to myself: Never ever again agree to performing a magical sex rite with Morrigan. Or anybody else.

I am completely freaked out. My treacherous body doesn't give a damn, though. While my panicking mind screams at me to get the fuck out of here, my body goes YIPPIE-YAH-YEAH! the very moment Morrigan screams the last words of her incantation into the night, then collapses on top of me.

SWOOSH! All lights off and we're once more surrounded by pitch black darkness... It engulfs me into an abyss of oblivion.
The Crack of Dawn

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Notevensorry for pre-reading.

Includes lyrics of the Bloodhound Gang, Status Quo and Monty Python.

Morrigan is gone - an immense improvement of my situation. I just wish she had cut me loose before she left. Lying naked on an altar in the middle of a creepy stone circle in the dark dark night... not exactly what I'd call relaxing. The ghostly lights are back, illuminating the whole predicament. This night certainly earns a place in the top ten worst moments of my life... Now, don't nail me down on the specific order of worst-ness... I am certainly not in the condition to think straight... I am not even sure if I am actually really conscious...

Okay, let's see...

The day Eamon sent me off to the Chantry. This one dulls compared to all the other worst days, but for a ten year old it ranked pretty high. It was the day when I realized I was truly and completely alone in this world.

My Joining - not the part of being a Grey Warden, but becoming one. Now thinking about it, I totally agree with Rori using Avernus' studies to make this torment less tormenting. That will last until I next meet that weird wizened wizard...

Duncan's death at Ostagar. Loghain got what he deserved - and still the dull ache of loss didn't fade a bit. I thought everything would be different when he died, that the emptiness Duncan left behind would somehow disappear... Guess Rori is right, it won't until I fill it and a death cannot fill anything. It's just another empty spot. It's the same for her with Howe and her family.

Meeting Goldanna. Maker! What a shrew! And again all hope shattered that maybe there could be a family for me... And then I find out my mother isn't my mother and Goldanna isn't my sister. I wish I had known before I went there and made a complete fool of myself...

Fighting the broodmother formerly Laryn - actually all days in the Deep Roads were terrible, but Laryn stole the show.

Isabela. Everything about her. It just wasn't worth the trouble.

The night Rori turned into a werewolf. Her agony tore me apart inside. I had to watch her suffer and there was absolutely nothing I could do to help her.

Fort Drakon. And again I couldn't protect the woman I love. Sure, I tried, pretty hard actually. But it wasn't enough. And although Rori calls me her hero, I didn't feel very heroic, bleeding all over the place while I had to watch how those sodding bastards... Merciful Andraste! Good thing, Rori hired Zevran or I'd have to sign some death warrants as my first kingly act.

The Landsmeet. Walked in as Just Alistair, walked out as King Alistair. Sometimes I wonder if I ever overcame the first shock. Sometimes I wonder if I ever will overcome the first shock. I still jump and look around for Anora every time anybody calls me Your Majesty.
And now sleeping with Morrigan...

I am just trying to figure out if Ostagar was worse than Morrigan or the other way round when...

"Alistair?"

"Ro-rori?"

I am so utterly thankful she's here, even more when she cuts the bonds, massages my wrists, wraps a blanket around my shoulders and shortly later I sit on the altar, munching cheese sandwiches and drinking sweet tea. Typically Rori! She's so practical. Instead of sitting around in the dark forest and bawling her eyes out while Morrigan and I were... err... busy... she organized food and drink and a warm blanket and bawled her eyes out in the process. At least they are all puffed and red and her cheeks smeared with dried tears.

I thought I wouldn't be able to eat anything, not when feeling so... dirty. Actually I'd wallow in self-pity right now without Rori. About how tough it was to be brought up by flying dogs, how scrubbing countless pots while at the chantry ruined my manicure... all those terrible things that only happen to me, you know. Rori doesn't pity me, neither about the dogs nor the pots nor the encounter with Morrigan. Bless her! I'd feel worse if she did. But Rori is gentle and loving, comforting and supporting in a way that helps me regain some of my dignity. And she doesn't allow me to break down. Instead I find myself standing in the middle of a shallow river right after I stuffed the last sandwich into my mouth, and thoroughly scrub myself to get rid of any trace of Morrigan still sticking to me.

So I splash around in the icy water and try to get over just having sired a demon brat with the evil witch-bitch. And I wonder what kind of mother she will be and if it matters at all when the child will have the soul of an old god... She said it won't be evil... But Morrigan will be the mother... and, well, she's not exactly the motherly type, you know. But she cares about Rori - at least that's what she said and she sounded... sincere. And while I splash and think, I look up when the moon emerges from behind the thick clouds and there, a few yards downstream, I catch sight of a female figure scrubbing herself just like I do...

When I turn to the shore there's Rori waiting for me. She lit a fire and the first thing she hands to me - even before wrapping my shivering freezing self in a blanket - is my mother's amulet. It smoothly fits into my palm, its weight is comforting. My mother never was there for me - but she cared. When she gave me away, she sought to protect me. This amulet, it's a sign, a reminder that, although she is not there, she thinks of me.

"Be right back," I mutter as I return to the river once more.

A piece of bark, a twig and the leave of a mable tree make for a nice little ship. And off it sails downstream with my Grey Warden amulet on board.

I watch Morrigan fish the boat out of the water. When she looks up and spots me, she inclines her head. I nod in return, feeling rather soppy and foolish...

That's when Rori whispers behind me: "I love you." Seems she's feeling rather soppy, too.

"You have a questionable taste in men," I grin. "Obviously I am a notorious cheater and now I even impregnated another woman."

"What can I say? I have a soft spot for bastards," Rori giggles. And then she pounces me, I slip, we tumble backwards into the water and she so has to get out of her clothes as not to catch a cold. And
of course we somehow have to get warm again.

I'm already kissing her fiercely when we stumble out of the water. Rori is a little reluctant, though. "Alistair," she gasps. "Are... are you sure?"

"I need you," I murmur, and blast, yes, I do. Being with Rori feels so right, it negates everything so wrong that happened before. After Riordan's revelation my plan for my last night alive certainly included Rori and excluded Morrigan. I don't really see why it should be the other way round now. Convincing Rori takes exactly ten seconds. Then she goes: "Oh bloody blast it!" and we get right to the steamy bits.

When the cold wakes us, the sky is already turning grey.

Blast! We're going to be late for the battle!

No careful sneaking this time. We jump into our clothes, grab our things and run.

"Good morning, Murdock. Tomas." I breathe rushing past the startled guards patrolling the camp. We burst past Ser Perth and Ser Donall standing guard in front of my kingsize tent. They yelp in surprise but we're already inside and receive our welcome reception - can't say it's very affectionate.

"WHERE IN THE NAME OF THE MAKER HAVE YOU BEEN!?" Eamon roars.

Rori and I stand there, frozen to the spot, holding hands as we gawk stupidly at the assembled people. Teagan, Riordan, the Grand Cleric, Irving. Yeah, and Eamon. None of them looks happy. Actually the expressions vary from greatly disappointed (Eamon) to utterly relieved (Riordan), 'Told-you-so!' (Grand Cleric) and confused (Irving - as he has fallen asleep in the armchair - it's incredible what kings drag along for camping! - and only got startled out of his slumber by Eamon's yelling). Teagan takes one look at us and starts laughing.

Oh blast! Rori and I are in for a right royal dressing-down. We of course deserve it. More than any of those assembled can imagine.

Not that there's much there considering the dressing. We were in such a hurry, we only put on as much as absolutely necessary to cover the important parts. Rori carries her boots in one hand. She ran all the way in her rainbow-coloured archdemon socks. The hastily closed blouse reveals far more than it should, giving everybody who cares to notice a grand view down her cleavage - and with a bosom like hers, it's impossible not to notice.

My own appearance also is far from royal. I have to hold on to my pants to stop them from falling - couldn't find my belt nowhere - and the shirt is back to front.

"Err... forest?" I mutter. Quite obvious actually with all the leaves and twigs entangled in Rori's hair.

"And what did you do there?" Eamon demands to know.

Rori and I turn a brighter shade of pink, ears glowing, and I begin to sweat.

"Err..." I mumble, unable to look Eamon in the eyes. Now, what we did there... Oh, well, some blood magic sex ritual including a Witch of the Wilds, the king of Ferelden and an ancient pagan altar used to worship an elven goddess... Nothing out of the ordinary, really. Nothing to get upset about... Oh merciful Andraste! And still no lightning of divine wrath sent from heaven above. I am somewhat getting the impression the Maker gives a damn.

"Uhm..." Rori murmurs, shifting her weight uneasily. Then with a sheepish grin, she adds
compunctiously: "Bit of frolicking? Uhm... kinda." We exchange a look and although she's flushed head to toe, there's utter relief displayed on her face. And on mine. Who would have thought that all those awkward moments of people walking in on us would one day save us? Nobody in here is even questioning we did anything else in the forest but some decent all night long lamp post licking.

Eamon's face is as red as ours. Different reason, though. He is hopping mad. "You are the king and future queen of Ferelden and at the eve of the battle - a battle that will decide the fate of this nation - you run off into the forest for... your own pleasures!"

"They are kids, Eamon," Teagan says soothingly.

"They are the monarchs of Ferelden!"

"That title doesn't make them any older or wiser. They are kids and behave just like kids do."

Err... yes, with the slight disparity that most kids don't perform blood-magic sex rites to imprison the soul of an old god in a human baby.

"Yes, and why not? I mean, that's probably the last night of our lives. What better way to spend it?" Rori shoots back defiantly. Teagan's face is red, too, by the effort of biting back his laughter.

"You should have spent it with prayers and contemplation!" the Grand Cleric preaches.

Rori snorts.

My attempts to look somewhat docile completely fail. All Rori's fault.

"Stop grinning!" the Grand Cleric snaps at me. "Nothing has changed. You are still a disgrace."

"A royal disgrace if you please," I correct her. Is this all she got? I get worse from Morrigan. Teagan almost chokes on his suppressed laughter by now.

"As the leader of this nation you have a responsibility...," Eamon begins but Rori cuts him short.

"So we went into the forest and had wild animalistic extramarital and un-replicating sex in various positions. Get over it!"

This... uhm... conversation is not exactly quiet. No wonder half of the camp is gathered outside the kingsize tent by now. Rori's declaration - shouted at the top of her voice - earns her a thunderous applause from our audience and some wolf-whistles.

Considering the Grand Cleric's expression she would love to bell, book and candle us right here and now. I'd advise against it. Rori is capable of founding her own religion. "For the love of Andraste! Don't we have other things to worry about?" Rori snaps. "Like, you know, the Blight, the archdemon, Denerim getting torn down by darkspawn right now? Do we really want to waste time arguing about the king's love life?"

"That is absolutely none of your business anyway," I add firmly.

"I thought you deserted," Riordan admits, sounding so utterly relieved that we didn't that my bad conscience scathingly glowers at me with contempt.

"Well, we're here now, so how about we prepare for battle?" I mutter, feeling like a complete failure, coward and traitor. I very much doubt, Riordan would pat my shoulder and go: 'Good of you, son!' if he knew anything about the ritual. It could save his life, too, sure, but I don't think he'd appreciate.
Thinking about it... Duncan wouldn't appreciate either. Blast! Too late for regret. Let's at least get the rest done right. "Now out of my tent! I'd prefer to put on my armour without everybody and their dog watching."

"I am too old for this," Irving murmurs to himself as he slowly hobbles past us. "Bet that the archdemon will choose the highest tower it can find for the battle. And I will have to climb all the stairs to get it. Have to talk to Dagna again about this lift-thing... Climb into a box and get lifted to any floor you like... If I didn't fear she'd blow up the whole tower..."

"Don't get distracted again," Teagan chuckles as he passes by, winking at me as he pats my shoulder. "Couldn't blame you if you did, though," he adds as Rori chooses this very moment to bend, putting on her boots. Her backside is as lovely as the front. Especially in these tight leather pants.

"Maker preserve us!" the Grand Cleric mutters, looking pointedly at Rori and me as if it was our fault that the darkspawn came into the world to begin with.

"The men and women out there rely on you, Alistair," Eamon reminds me. "The king controls the moral of his soldiers."

"Yeah? Then I better not tell them we're all doomed, right?"

Instead two hours later, King Alistair in his shiny splendiferous armour, mounted on a noble steed, prepares to hold a speech, preferably an encouraging one... I feel like a clown and Master Dennet muttering to Teagan "The boy's riding as if he had a pole stuck up his shirt" when I pass by, doesn't help with my uncomfortableness. The army has assembled on a hill with a grand view at Denerim, burning houses, masses of darkspawn and corpses littering the ground included. Not exactly the best motif for a picture postcard. And high up in the sky the archdemon is circling above the city, breathing its blue flames onto my palace!

"It's burning down my house!" I cry, feeling personally insulted.

"How about stopping it then?" Zevran advises cheerfully. Then he beams at the drunken dwarf who beams back at the murderous elf and both roar: "The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire! We don't need no water let the motherfucker burn. Burn, motherfucker, burn!"

"When you said you had mushroom ragout last night with the Legion of the Dead, what kind of mushrooms did you mean actually?" Wynne wonders aloud. All the granny mage receives for an answer is Oghren and Zevran giggling like little girls.

"Whatever they ate, I want some, too," Rori says, hurrying after the dwarf and the elf staggering off arm in arm, singing at the top of their voices: "The archdemon's flyin' over your head if you wanna survive, get out of bed. You're in the army now. Oh, oh you're in the army, now."

I guess I can't just join the choir. Too bad. Okay, so here we go. I push my horse to the front of the army - my army - riding up the staircase off a former watchtower. Towering over the men and women, elves, dwarves and humans, one golem and one Qunari - I can see the fear in their eyes. They all look at me for guidance - what a joke! Just that this is serious, so I put on my serious face and shout in my serious voice:

"Before us stand the might of the darkspawn horde. Gaze upon them now but fear them not" Easier said then done, really. I myself very much feel like wetting my pants and the effort of controlling my facial features already results in a cramp in my jaws. I have no blasted clue what to say next when everybody expects me to say something epic. That's when I spot Rori giving me thumbs up. "This woman beside me," I go on, beckoning Rori to join me and Shale just lifts her onto my horse to sit
behind me. "Err... this woman behind me is a native of Ferelden, risen to the ranks of the Grey Wardens..."

"Risen is quite a euphemism considering how and why I got there," Rori mutters in my ear.

"She is proof that glory is within reach of us all..."

"Glory sounds like a pretty inscription for a gravestone," Rori murmurs. "Say something positive!"

"Shut up and look confident," I hiss under my breath, nudging her with my elbow. "She has survived despite the odds, and without her, none of us would be here!"

"Fortune favours fools," Rori whispers as I turn the horse and have it prance down the stairs and ride up and down the long row of soldiers at the very front.

"Today, we save Denerim!" I shout and Rori goes; "YAY!"

"Today, we avenge the death of my brother, King Cailan!"

"Woot!" Rori cheers.

"How many of those mushrooms did you eat?" I whisper.

"Uhm..." Rori begins to count on her fingers.

"But most of all," I return to the speech-business. "Today we show the Grey Wardens that we remember and honour their sacrifice." Rori is still immersed in figuring out her mushroom consumption. "Battle starts now," I inform her.

"Awesome!" she beams, clapping her hands.

"You are the commander of this army," I remind her.

"Oh, well... darkspawn, this way!" My fellow Grey Warden points at the burning city. "You can't miss it."

I decide it's better to keep her here with me and draw my sword, lifting it in the air. "For Ferelden!" I roar, my cry answered by a thousand throats. Rori squeals with delight. "For the Grey Wardens!"

As I spur my horse to galop, rushing down the hill with thundering hooves, and with the cavalry wheeling up into line behind me, I can hear the distant singing of the Legion of the Dead: "So always look on the bright side of death. Just before you draw your terminal breath..." And Rori whistles along...

"WOHA!" she breathes when suddenly a wall of magical fire appears in front of us, rolling towards the front line of darkspawn with their rampart of pikes, blowing it away as if it was a card house...

Then we crash into the darkspawn, cutting down bodies left and right. This is it. The final battle. Our adventure ends here... perhaps there will be new ones awaiting us afterwards...

It all rests in the Maker's hands.
Storming Denerim

I'd like to say that our courage has us defeat the army of darkspawn awaiting us in front of Denerim's gates - more like what is left of the gates... But it's actually deep mushrooms pickled in dwarven ale with a pinch of lyrium.

Rori is so stoned, she's fearless.

We get thrown of our horse right at the beginning of the battle - totally my fault. And while I am still busy picking myself off the ground in my heavy armour, Rori goes berserk on the darkspawn. Barkley at her side, she just charges an ogre as if she was ten feet tall herself. And as someone has to make sure she survives this madness, I am right at her heels, hitting and slicing and cutting down any darkspawn that gets in my way. And as I am the king and it's not exactly conducive for your career to twiddle your thumbs while your monarch defeats the darkspawn horde on his own, my royal guard charges with me. And so does the rest of the army.

According to the cheering and battle cries from the soldiers, I give a rather glorious and heroic impression - when all I am trying to do is protect my uncontrollably giggling woman. She has completely lost any sense of danger.

"Blast and damnation!" Morrigan curses next to me as she beats a Genlock over the head with her staff before it can backstab Rori. "What does she think I did this ritual for? I swear if she dies I am going to use necromancy on her just to kill her again."

"Count me in," I pant, slamming my shield into a Hurlock's chest, sending him to the ground before he can chop off Rori's pretty but momentarily rather useless head. And where is her blasted helmet!? At least she is easily detected. So I just follow the mass of bouncing red curls since Rori rather aimlessly runs amok on the battlefield. One moment she's right next to me, when I turn she's gone, leaving behind a swath of destruction. She lunges at the archdemon twice when the mighty dragon swoops for the soldiers - yeah, swooping is bad! - and clutches them in its claws, soaring to the sky again only to let them drop back to earth. Once Rori gets hold of the archdemon's tail and clings to it and I cling to her legs to pull her down and we both get lifted off the ground. Thankfully she slips and falls when the archdemon's only a few feet above the ground. She slams right into me and we both tumble down together right in time to miss being smashed by an ogre's club.

"Rori!" I cry, trying to grab her but - "Hehehehe!" - there she goes again.

I am so going to spank her - once I get hold of her... For now I rattle, clank and pant after her, accompanied by our faithful companions minus Zevran and Oghren. I have no clue where exactly they are. Though sometimes I hear them shouting numbers at each other across the battlefield.

Our insane actions electrify the soldiers, our mushroom-triggered fearlessness gives them courage. They fight as if there was no tomorrow - which unfortunately is true for far too many of them -, they fight their hearts out - which unfortunately also is true for some of them, and believe me, you do not want to know the details - and the remaining darkspawn retreat into the city, fleeing from the combined forces of all races of Thedas - and one golem.

On entering the city the darkspawn finds itself under attack by another troup. Their banner, a mabari facing a griffon, all bracketed by laurel wraths... it's what remains of our Warden's Peak reinforcement and Ser Gilmore leads them into battle. Blasts from Jowan's and Solona's staffs and
Darrian with his whirling swords attack the enemy on the flank as we take the outer wall. Behind them Levi and Mikhael Dryden try very hard not to die.

"Levi! Didn't you say you were a merchant, not a fighter?" I shout when the little group joins us.

"I am the supply officer," Levi stammers. He's a whiter shade of pale and has obviously wet his pants - several times - and still he clings to his sword and hits clumsily at any darkspawn in reach. The poor sod is close to breaking down.

"You're a hero, Levi," I say, patting his shoulder compassionately. "You restore the honour of the Dryden family." It's heart-warming, that smile of pride that breaks through the fear when Levi straightens.

"This means more to me than words can say, your Majesty," Levi snivels, tears of joy stinging his eyes. Then he falls to his knees and presents his weapon. "My sword is yours, your Majesty."

"Better keep it for now, Levi. There's more darkspawn coming."

Meanwhile Rori gives Gilmore a hug. "Gil! Nice to have you back again! Sol!" Letting go of the startled knight, she pounces the mage. "Jo!" And the second mage. "Darrian! Whoa, you've grown!"

"Tis a Hurlock, you fool!"

"Oops!" Rori lets go of the darkspawn and with a smooth motion cuts its head off.

"What is wrong with her?" Gilmore demands to know.

"Shrooms," Zevran slurs with a wide grin plastered across his face. He and the dwarf have reappeared, covered in ichor head to toe. "Only nibbled at hers. Hey, Rori! You want the rest?" He pulls a shiny blue mushroom from a satchel at his belt.

"Maker! No! I need her to be able to think or I'll have to do it!"

"Nobody wants that," Morrigan remarks.

"Alas." The elf shrugs and pops the shroom into his mouth.

"Thank the Maker you are finally here! We arrived shortly before the darkspawn. Most of our men are dead by now. The Mac Eanraigs are stuck at the harbour," Gilmore fills me in on the situation as we gather for a quick briefing. "They tried to get as many people out of the city as possible, but the archdemon burnt their ships. The pier is crowded with people, I doubt the Mac Eanraigs can defend them much longer. They need reinforcement!"

"Ser Perth here will select a group of soldiers to aid you."

"Knight-Commander Tavish and his templars fight their last stand to keep the people inside the chantry save. Avernus is there to aid them..."

"Avernus is defending the Chantry!? Maker's Breath!" Horror visions of Avernus' attempt of defending Warden's Peak pop up in my mind. I already see an invasion of demons tearing down what is left of my capital, competing against the darkspawn about who can cause more destruction.
"That's what templars are for, aren't they?" Gilmore asks as if he was reading my mind. "We thought they at least would know how to handle him should he get strange ideas."

"Your word in the Maker's ears."

"Sergeant Kylon and his men could need a hand, too," Gilmore goes on. "Better a sword. Or two. People took refuge inside the palace, the guards cannot hold the gates for much longer..."

"Best we save the whole city, right?" I sigh. The remains of the city. And whoever is still alive. Parts of the outer wall have collapsed, the reddish glow of numerous fires all over the city illuminate the sky, the thick stench of burnt flesh and blood, of smoke and decay makes my eyes water.

"Sounds like a good plan," Gilmore agrees. "Oh, and we cannot find Nan and the elven girl... Amy. There's nothing much left of Arl Eamon's estate but they were not amongst the dead... at least those we could identify."

"Nan is here, too? You brought a helpless granny into a city invaded by darkspawn!?"

"An old hag armed with a frying pan," Gilmore corrects me. "She insisted. And you do not say no when Nan insists." Agreed. She's an old battle-axe for sure.

"We're doing better than I hoped," Riordan says on approaching us. He sounds as exhausted as he looks. At the other side of the court, Teagan regroups the Redcliffe troops. After a quick conversation with Eamon Leonas Bryland marches his men off into the city. He left his daughter in Denerim when he departed for Redcliff, believing her to be save here.

"That will change quickly," Sten growls. Always the optimist, isn't he?

"Bloody nug-runners, we're outnumbered three to one," Oghren grunts.

"The army will not last long, so we need to move quickly to reach the archdemon," Riordan insists, addressing Rori. She doesn't even listen. Every time she pokes the dying darkspawn lying on the ground with her foot, it twitches. She's enraptured by the spectacle - until I ram my sword into the darkspawn's skull and end her game. "I suggest taking Alistair and no more than two others with you into the city."

WHAT!? Four of us against the archdemon? One or two more won't hurt, will they? How much attention can we draw anyway?

"Anyone you don't bring with you can stay here to prevent more darkspawn from entering Denerim on our tails," Riordan goes on.

Indeed.

"Darkspawn?" Rori rejoices, sounding exactly like Sandal when asked to make an enchantment. She even bounces around like he does and claps her hands. Her pupils are dilated with only a narrow ring of blue surrounding them, and she grins maniacly.

"What the..." Riordan snaps, frowning at the foolishly gawking girl.

"Err... the archdemon is flying around, you know." I draw his attention away from her same time I wrap my arm around her shoulder to stop her from staggering off and fighting the archdemon on her
own. "So as long as we don't all climb into catapults or intend to ride ballista missiles, I don't see how we should get him."

"We're going to need to reach a high point in the city. I'm thinking, the top of Fort Drakon might work," Riordan muses.

"The top of...? You want to draw the dragon's attention?" I gasp. Marvellous! And there I thought this day would be boring!

"We have little choice," Riordan sighs.

"I knew it! I knew there would be stairs," Irving grumbles on passing by.

"Okay, so we climb Fort Drakon and do what? Flip it the bird and shout obscenities at the archdemon?" I don't really get why the archdemon should do us the favour and actually land on Fort Drakon instead of just ignoring us or frying us with its blue fire. I mean, its horde is doing a damn good job down here, so why endanger itself to encounter three Grey Wardens. Three! I can almost hear it laugh its corrupted ass off.

"Leave that to me," Riordan assures me. I really do hope he has an ace up his sleeve. "I warn you, though, as soon as we engage the beast it will call all its generals to help it. I can sense two generals in Denerim."

He can? Wow. I only sense a whole lot of darkspawn and you don't exactly need a Grey Warden to tell as the streets are crammed with them.

"You may wish to seek them out before going to Fort Drakon."

"Yep, top of my wish-list." Taking down the generals also means bereaving the darkspawn of their leaders. Soldiers without anybody shouting commands at them tend to run around like headless chicken.

So I choose Wynne and Shale and Rori drags Oghren and Zevran along - I somewhat doubt that's what Riordan meant, but, oh well, Zevran, Rori and Oghren are so small, they count as one. Rori says goodbye to her companions. Morrigan isn't delighted but Rori - as stoned as she is - at least has some common sense left.

"It's too dangerous in there. Stay at the gates, stay out of trouble and try to stay alive." Rori clumsily hugs Morrigan who hugs her back as clumsily. I can't get rid of the feeling Morrigan isn't done yet. She has something else to say... "Rori!" ...but Rori already turns to me - and being king I am surrounded by about a dozen people who all want something from me - and the witch hesitates. I have to snap at Eamon, Teagan, Wulff and some other nobles to at least give me some space to say goodbye to Rori. Just in case.

"So, this could be it," I mutter, wishing I had swallowed the rest of Rori's mushroom as she's beaming at me like she couldn't think of anything funnier than challenging the archdemon. I take her hands in mine and her smile grows even wider. "Soon this will be finished. One way or another. And I love you. Always."

"Love you, too," Rori whispers. "Always and forever." Then she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me Rori-like. For as long as our breath lasts the world around me fades and it's only Rori and I. One last blissful moment before we get thrown back into the perdition threatening to swallow
us for good. "Now, where's that oversized lizard," Rori mutters as she turns away, marching off towards the Market District without looking back. She is accompanied by the cheers of the soldiers, telling her to kill those godless bastards.

I am about to follow her when...

"Alistair!" Morrigan calls me breathlessly. "Listen! Tis important!"

"Yeah, I know, I'm a fool," I sigh as I keep walking. Morrigan runs after me and grabs my arm.

"You are if you don't listen!"

Okay. Morrigan sounding serious. No good.

"What is it then?"

"Rori mustn't slay the archdemon," the witch blurs out. "It's a matter of life and death. Do you hear me?"

I do hear her but I do not understand. "What...?"

"Alistair?" Rori calls. "Are you coming?"

"One moment!" I call over my shoulder. But when I turn back to the witch she's gone. Blasted curses of a thousand misfortunes! Why does she always have to be so cryptic!? Why does nobody believe I deserve an explanation!?

"What did Morrigan want?" Rori asks when I join her.

"Nothing," I mumble when my mind is running wild with speculations. A matter of life and death? Does that mean Rori would die if she slayed the archdemon? But Morrigan said the ritual would solve that little problem, didn't she? So what in the name of the Maker does she want now?

Merciful Andraste!

The ritual didn't work! What else could the witch mean? Maker's Breath, Morrigan didn't become pregnant as she thought and now... if Rori killed the archdemon...

Doom!

DOOM!

So of course Morrigan would warn me. The only thing Morrigan and I ever agreed upon is that Rori mustn't die. And that means... I groan. I suddenly feel very very sick. "Err... you think Zev has one of these mushrooms left?"

Rori might be stoned but she isn't stupid. "You look as if you have seen a ghost, Alistair. What did Morrigan tell you?"

"Err... she called me a fool, same as usual," I lie. As determined as Morrigan and I are to keep Rori alive, as stubborn is she about saving me. I just know her. Rori might be scared out of her mind - or would be without deep mushrooms pickled in dwarven ale with a pinch of lyrium - but for me she
would give her life. Like I would give mine for her.

"Shouldn't shock you anymore," Rori snorts. She tries to frown but with that broad stoned grin she just miserable fails.

I shrug and fail as miserably at my lopsided grin. Rori stops dead and turns to face me. Now she does frown.

Blast!

I sigh. "I... it's nothing, really. I am just worried. How can Morrigan know if... this... works?"

"Why? Did she say something about it?" Rori asks suspiciously.

Blast! Why do I always have to put my foot right in my mouth. "Noooo... she just said to wish you good luck..." I mutter, all flustered by now.

"You just claimed she called you a fool." She's sobering up far too quickly.

I should have let Zevran give her that mushroom.

What should I do? I cannot tell her! Like Morrigan wouldn't tell her... although she tried, didn't she? Why would she do that? When she wants to keep Rori save, it makes no sense. Rori would die for me and I would die for her and if the ritual didn't work one of us will have to die when slaying the archdemon. And you can be damn sure that Rori would beat me to it, sneaky little brat. So, I cannot tell her what Morrigan said, right? Because she would jump to the same conclusion as I and then...

Rori is about to interrogate me further and I am about to dig my own grave when a darkspawn attack saves me.

I've never been so thankful for an ogre swinging me like a dead cat!

We find the first general in front of the Chantry - or more likely it finds us. We just stumble around the havoked Market District aimlessly, slaying whatever darkspawn we meet. There's only few people left on the streets, chased by darkspawn. Corpses pile on the ground, terribly mutilated. Screams of pain and death cries, the snarling and grunting of the darkspawn, the clinking of metal against metal, the roaring of the fires - it's a nightmarish cacophony. And the stench is... let's just not talk about it.

When we passed by Goldanna's burning house, I couldn't help but wonder what happened to her. She might not be my sister and her children not my nieces and nephews, I still hope she is alive and still kicking - and save since being alive amongst darkspawn isn't anything a woman should wish for.

"What took you so long?" Avernus greets us when we show up in front of the Chantry. Surrounded by the last three templars and Mother Perpetua in the flesh, he sits in a wheelchair in the yard and blasts spells and curses at any darkspawn stupid enough to appear in sight - they can call themselves lucky that the old geezer's eyes aren't the best anymore. Thus the reason why he almost blasts Oghren's head off.

Can't say he's very helpful in fighting the general and his buddies. We have to dodge both darkspawn and Avernus' spells. But at least some of them hit home and in the end the archdemon has one general less. I wonder if it can feel the loss like Riordan can sense they are there.
"What in the name of the Maker are you doing here?" I demand to know, stepping past a dead templar to cut down a Hurlock before it can cut down Avernus. Knight-Commander Tavish is the only templar left and if Wynne doesn't hurry, he'll meet the Maker soon.

"Killing darkspawn. That's what Grey Wardens do. You should have learnt that much by now."
Thus said Avernus falls unconscious instantly in his wheelchair, his breath comes with a rattling wheeze. It sounds like a death rattle actually. He is a very very old, very very weak and very very ill man with a gaping wound across his chest. He couldn't slay a fly, much less a corrupted dragon. That much for my plan to have Shale give him a piggyback ride to the archdemon and Avernus the chance of a heroic death and thus solve all my problems.

So I just help a very very pale Mother Perpetua roll his wheelchair into the Chantry. Seems the Blight brings people together after all, even an old blood mage and a revered mother.

Next stop the alienage.

We arrive in time to witness how a Genlock tries to drag away a screaming and kicking Amethyne. It doesn't get far because Nan takes it by the scruff of its neck and beats it over its head with her frying pan. Too bad Duncan never saw her in action. He'd have recruited her at once.

"About time," Nan snaps once we make short work of the darkspawn. "You think an old woman like me can end the whole Blight on her own?" She clonks her pan against my breast plate. "Here, took care of the knife-eared brat."

"Can you take care of her a little longer, Nan?" Rori asks after hugging Amy tight. The poor kid is scared stiff but unhurt. Barkley is so delighted to see his little friend, he slobbers all over her. "We have no time to accompany you back to the gates. Can you hide somewhere? Amy knows the city like the back of her hand."

"What do you think I am? A babysitter? Oh, don't you look at me like that!" Nan huffs. She glowers at Rori, Rori cocks her head to one side and smiles her sweetest smile and the old hag melts like ice in the sunshine. "Come on then!" she snaps at Amy. "If you make any trouble, I'll skin you useless elf, I swear it!"

"Pipe down!" Amy retorts as she drags Nan away. "You keep screeching like that the darkspawn will mistake you for a Shriek."

Boy, what a team!

Shianni and a group of elves have gathered close to the huge tree. It's still unharmed and the sight of it somehow gives me hope. That is instantly shattered when Shianni informs us of approaching darkspawn, the second general included. So a few encouraging words later, our little group with the backup of the elven archers stomp some more darkspawn into the ground.

"Alistair! Look!" Rori cries, pointing her sword at the sky.

I look and just in time drop to the ground to avoid being knocked over by the archdemon soaring down from the dark sky. Its claws scrape the back of my armour and then it is gone again, rising high and higher as it tries to shake off the tiny figure on his back. Riordan!

I begin to wonder if he has secretly munched some shrooms, too.
Clinging to the back of the beast, he hacks at it with his sword. Rori and I watch breathlessly, craning our necks to get a better look when the archdemon thunders past us once more, crashing against a nearby tower, rocks raining down on us - and Riordan. I have a shield to cover my and Rori's head. And we have a golem to punch the boulders away as if she was training for the Fistball Thedas Cup. Riordan, however, is defenseless. Clinging to the hilt of his sword, he desperately tries to hold on. The blade is sharp and with his weight added it slides through flesh and bones, slipping down the archdemon's back and past its tail...

We watch the archdemon save its hide with a few last powerful flaps of its wings, just making it to the top of Fort Drakon. And we watch Riordan fall, down, down, down - until he crashes into the ground some place out of sight...

With him my last hope is shattered.

Morrigan's words ring in my ears. 'Rori mustn't slay the archdemon! It's a matter of life and death. Do you hear me?'

Briefly I am tempted to walk back to the Market District and drag Avernus out of the Chantry. Have Shale squeeze his fingers around the hilt of a sword and lead his arm as if he was the puppet and she the puppeteer... But we already tried to cheat once and where did it get us?

Blast!

I only notice I have taken hold of Rori's hand when she squeezes mine. I don't dare to look at her. I don't want her to read my thoughts displayed through my expression.

_The Light shall lead me safely_
_Through the paths of this world, and into the next._
_For I who trusts in the Maker, fire is my water._
_As the moth sees light and goes toward flame,_
_I should see fire and go towards Light._
_The Veil holds no uncertainty for me,_
_And I will know no fear of death, for the Maker_  
_Shall be my beacon and my shield, my foundation and my sword._
Fires block our direct way to Fort Drakon, so we hurry up the hill towards the Palace District. The city stretches below us, the glow of the fire turns the water blood red. The burning ships at the pier illuminate a scene of horror... The Mac Eanraigs' line of defense has broken and the beasts swarm the pier, slaughtering anybody in their way. Angus Mac Eanraig is clearly visible against the red sky, a man like a giant, standing on top of the barricade of piled carts and boxes, sacks and furniture. His battle axe chops down darkspawn unceasingly, he's fighting his last stand when all hope fails. The Mac Eanraig triplets form a trinity of defense and yet neither their courage nor Jessica's magic can save them. They get swept away by the mere mass of darkspawn. An ogre grabs Ronan around his waist and just breaks him in two as if he was a twig, then tosses him aside like garbage...

The screams of the trapped people below echo through the night, rising above the battle cries and the roaring of the fires. They run but there's no way out for them. Chased by the darkspawn people jump into the sea to save themselves. For many it becomes a wet grave. Bloated corpses float on the water next to men and women and children clinging to whatever they could get hold of. Smaller boats careen and sink when the desperate try to climb on board of the already crowded boats.

"We have to help them!" Rori shouts, starting downhill. It's the second time she has to watch her family being slaughtered and there's nothing she can do about it.

I can get hold of her before she gets lost in the chaos. "We help them by slaying the archdemon," I insist, feeling like a complete jerk at the sight of her tears. "The sooner the better!" Maker's Breath! It's decisions like this I never wanted to make. My heart tells me to run to their aid, but what feels right is not necessarily the right thing to do. Not in this case. Blast it!

"Alistair, please!" Rori drums her small fists against my breast plate as I hold her as tight as possible. She kicks at me and squirms, a faltering attempt to break free when she realizes that she cannot change their fates...

"Gilmore and Perth are on their way..."

"They will never be there in time!" Rori cries desperately when Angus is hit by several arrows and tumbles down the barricade. Her luck she has to sober up right now.

"Neither will we," I whisper sadly, embracing her. There's no comfort there to offer but a whole lot of platitudes. She certainly would kick me if I gave her a preach about bravery and heroism. So I just kiss her brow, gently wipe her tears away and turn her around, pointing the direction of Fort Drakon. She needs someone to blame, it's right there. She staggers a few steps, before straightening - and still she moves as if she had the weight of the world weighing her down, every step an effort, her small frame shaken by her sobs.

"Zev? Shrooms?" Rori mutters, tears streaming down her cheeks as she presents her palm to the elf. His mouth full, he looks like a chipmunk.

"Hmph," he goes, then spits the thoroughly chewed content into Rori's hand.

"Ewww!" Rori squeaks. "Thank you but no thank you! I'm not that desperate! Not yet." Zevran shrugs and like a dog slobbers the mud-shrooms off her hand before Rori can drop the whole mess onto the ground. "Oh well..." She casts one last look at the harbour before turning away with desperate determination. "There is no way but forward and that leads towards death," Rori murmurs faintheartedly. I take her hand, squeezing it lightly. "How does that sound?" she sighs. "Famous last
"words, huh?"

"Sounds rather pathetic. Not your style." I nudge her side, she nudges back.

"Oh bloody blast it," Rori hisses, wiping her nose at her sleeve. "What are we waiting for? Time to slay that sodding dragon!" She cocks her head to one side, grinning sadly. "Better?"

"Much better."

The palace of Denerim is rather fancy considering Fereldan standards. It for sure isn't a fortress so it's no surprise the darkspawn have overrun the guards some time ago and are now trying to break into the palace itself. An ogre is halfway stuck in a window, darkspawn crawl over it to reach the upper floors and cause havoc inside the palace. People run around, screaming, while Sergeant Kylon and his remaining men lose ground with every second passing. When we storm into the court, I collide with a fleeing woman. She drops her bundle and silver spoons, plates, goblets, a candle holder - all bearing the Theirin crest - clatter onto the cobblestones.

"Goldanna!" I exclaim, identifying the woman crawling around on the ground and stuffing her precious treasure back into her bundle. "You steal my silverware? Now?"

"You!" my dear not-really-sister snaps, straightening, her arms loaded with my royal silver. "This is all your fault! If you had treated me as I deserved..." And that's when Rori punches her straight in the face. The silver clinks to the ground again and Goldanna, tumbling against the wall, clutches her bleeding nose.

"The day's looking up already," Rori says with grim satisfaction.

"Thank you," I grin.

"You're welcome."

There's more important things to deal with than Goldanna stealing my silver, so we leave her be to slay some more darkspawn instead. Kylon almost cries with relief at our arrival. Next to him Ser Cauthrien swings her sword with adamant determination. She can hardly stand upright, her left arm is dangling uselessly at her side only attached to the rest of her body by a few tendons - and still she fights.

"For Ferelden!" she cries when we join her. "Hail King Alistair!" Her cry is answered by exactly thirteen throats - that's all the men she still got - and they lunge into battle with refreshed spirit and courage. I'm astonished at her reaction. She has to know what happened to Loghain, what I did. Still she is here, defending Ferelden in the name of the newly minted king.

"For Ferelden! For the Grey Wardens!" I shout, leading my small troup into battle.

Rori and Zevran climb the ogre stuck in the window, following its companions. Seconds later the first darkspawn get tossed out of the windows. Oghren and Barkley rush to Kylon's aid while I join Cauthrien's side. She's on her knees, defending herself with her last strength. Shale exercises the discipline of darkspawn long throw. She grabs one by its feet, swings it, turning round and round and then sends it flying across the palace wall and high up into the sky.

I drop to my knees into the puddle of blood next to Ser Cauthrien as soon as the fight is over, holding her in my arms while Rori takes her hand and Wynne casts her spells. According to the mage's worried expression there's hardly anything she can still do for the wounded knight. Cauthrien is deadly pale, her breathing comes as a gurgling wheeze, the glimmer in her eyes fades.
"Your Majesty," Cauthrien croaks, blood spluttering from her mouth at every word. "I wanted to make things right," she breathes, forcing the words across her trembling lips. "So many mistakes, so many crimes... all in Loghain's name."

"Hush. You fought bravely, Ser Cauthrien," I whisper. "You are a true knight of Ferelden, heart and soul. Loghain would be proud of you. I am proud of you. I wish... we could have met under different circumstances."

"Me, too." Her blood smeared lips form to a small, shy smile, then a spasm runs through her whole body and she become limp in my arms.

"No!" Rori gasps. "Wynne! You have to help her!"

"I did what I could," the granny mage says exhaustedly. "Her fate now lies in the Maker's hands. If He pleases, she will live. All we can do is pray and hope."

"The Maker gives a damn about any of us!" Rori snaps forcefully. Covered in blood and ichor head to toe, tired, exhausted and emotionally drained, last thing she wants to hear is a sermon with words that sound nothing but empty to her. Can't blame her. These are times to lose ones faith.

"We are here for a reason, my dear child," Wynne says softly. "The Maker guides our steps to fulfill our destiny. We are His tools in this world and through us He protects His children."

"Garbage!" Rori snorts, tempted to show Wynne the same kindness she offered Goldanna. "I for sure neither feel guided nor protected. If we don't get things done, nobody will."

Boy, she's hopping mad now. We all got something that keeps us going. Wynne has her faith, Oghren his liquor, Zevran got shrooms, I got my duty and Rori has her anger. Shale... well, Shale gets to squish a whole lot of soft flesh creatures which is certainly more entertaining than standing around on a village square day in, day out.

Reluctantly we leave Ser Cauthrien in Sergeant Kylon's care. Their odds are long to survive this night. More darkspawn will soon arrive at the palace and there's nobody left to fight them. Their only chance is us slaying the archdemon as soon as possible...

Fort Drakon rises into the sky like a huge...

"What is it with you surfacers? All these huge erect buildings... You try to compensate something?" Oghren grunts.

... err... Nevermind.

"Don't you feel sick and tired of towers by now?" Rori groans. "Every tower we went to, was crammed with trouble first floor to the top."

"It ends as it began," I observe.

"It began with a defeat," Rori presses through gritted teeth. "Let's make it a victory this time!"

I hug her, kissing the top of her head. "That's my girl," I grin, glad to have my kick-ass gingersnaps at my side.

"I still think we should have gone to Orlais, lived in sin and eaten cake," Rori sulks. "It was the best idea you ever had."
Shale works as a portable battle ram, crashing down the front gates and the darkspawn guarding it in one go.

I really didn't think Fort Drakon could get even more unpleasant than it was during our last visit. Well, life always has a surprise in store. Corpses everywhere, blood splattered across the floors, walls, even the damn ceiling. The obligatory fires, the stench... well, you get the picture. Just one thing is different... the death silence.

Now, what can I say? Darkspawn, darkspawn and yep, more darkspawn. They've moved in and made themselves at home - I wouldn't recommend their interior decorator, though - and we throw them out again, cleansing every floor thoroughly. Last thing we want is an army in our back when we reach the top of the tower.

We burst into the next room, weapons drawn, magic sizzling from Wynne's staff - and get pounced by something short covered in ichor and blood. It clings to my leg, hugging it tightly.

"Rori! Alibear! Puppy!"

"Huh!? Sandal!? Maker's Breath! I almost chopped your head off!" I breathe, shaking the young dwarf off. He happily bounces around the room with Barkley, playing fetch the stick with a torn off arm.

"Crazy nug-licker," Oghren grunts. "That's what too many deep mushrooms do to your brain, son, just blow your mind out." Zevran coughs nervously before sticking his finger down his throat. "But for the love of nugs and idiot children, bucking the forbidden horse when stoned is the sodding best romp you'll ever have..." Zevran re-swallows the whole sludge he just disgorged.

It proves impossible to worm any information out of Sandal, simply because he is blissfully oblivious of the danger he is in. Well, he and Bodahn get their wares mostly from the Deep Roads and that's where the dwarven merchant found his adopted son, so darkspawn obviously is so normal to him, he's not scared. Strangely the beasts also don't bother him.

"Enchantment?" he cheers when Rori tells him to hide somewhere. And then he waddles after us as we move on, following us like a puppy.

The darkspawn have made short work of both guards and inmates. After all those broken down doors it's a miracle we find one yet intact. Two Hurlocks have picked up a Genlock like a ram and smash its head against the door repeatedly. From inside the cell sound the screams of a woman... her voice is somewhat familiar.

"Thank the Maker!" Anora calls through the closed door once the Hurlocks lie dead. "I would greet you properly if only you opened the door!"

"This day is so full of déjà-vus," I observe.

"Yeah, next she's going to tell us an emissary magically sealed the door and the archdemon swallowed it afterwards so now we have to retrieve it from its stomach," Rori giggles.

"What are you giggling about!?" Anora demands to know, her pale face appearing at the small barred window of the door. "This is not funny! Open the door already! There's darkspawn everywhere! They killed everybody!"

"Now you mention it...," I grin while Rori picks the lock.

"The darkspawn have overrun the city," she informs Anora as soon as the former queen steps out of
her cell. Even in the midst of a darkspawn siege, she is perfect in her appearance. "The archdemon is sitting on top of Fort Drakon and we have to slay it now or never."

"The archdemon!" Anora gasps, her face drained off all colour.

"As large as life," I confirm.

"Either you come with us and stay out of the way or you're on your own," Rori goes on. "Your decision."

"The city is lost!" Anora screeches, furiously pointing her finger at me and Rori. "This would have never happened if my father..."

It's punch-the-bitch-day for Rori. She grabs Anora's finger, bends it backwards and same time slams her fist into the ex-queen's face.

"You know, I might have been wrong about the Maker after all," she muses while Anora whines and clutches her bleeding nose. Her perfect looks destroyed she now at least fits in. "At least I get to kick all the sodding pissy bitch asses I always wanted to kick before I die. That's very considerate of Him."

"Language," Wynne sighs. "Don't even get me started on the blasphemy!"

"How dare you!" Anora complains. I'm not sure if she means Zevran helping her back to her feet and in the process groping her hindquarters or Rori punching her.

"Get over it! If this is the worst that happens to you today, you can call yourself lucky." Rori snaps, picking up one of the swords the guards have dropped and thrusting it at Anora. She clumsily weighs it in her hands. Maker! The greatest general Ferelden ever had and he didn't teach his daughter how to distinguish the hilt from the blade! We should lock her up again and throw the key away. This cell is the safest place she could be. "So, you want to try it on your own or come with us?"

"How does one make such a decision?" Anora wonders. "I... I think I could hide somewhere..."

"This is uncharacteristically wise of you," I tease with a lopsided grin, earning myself a scathing glare. "And while you're hiding, could you babysit Sandal for us?" My hands on his shoulders, I push the kid forward.

"Enchantment?" the dwarf rejoices.

"You want me to look after this retard!?" Anora is completely indignant at the mere thought.

"This formidable fellow - or retard as you choose to call him - is a dwarven prince and a Paragon. He's the best natural enchanter Thedas has ever seen," Rori flat-out lies to the ex-queen, ignoring Oghren snorting his drink out of his nose at her words. "King Belhen certainly would appreciate if we returned him save and sound."

"You really think I would believe such a blatant lie?" Anora huffs.

"When cornered by a horde of darkspawn, you cannot be picky about your companions," Rori points out.

"Obviously," Anora remarks, pointedly regarding the drunken dwarf, the stoned elf, the granny mage, the golem in red sandals and me. Rori clenches her fist to punch her again and that very much helps Anora to make up her mind. "Fine, he can come with me!"
Rori takes off her necklace with the vial of poison. Ever since we found out how the darkspawn turns women into broodmothers, she has been taking precautions. There's worse fates than death. "Here. If the darkspawn catches you, drink this."

"Poison? This is how you plan to get rid of me?"

"Don't be absurd!" Rori snorts, kneeling down to hug Sandal and tousle his hair. He beams at her joyously. "Farewell Sandal. Good luck, Anora. You'll need it."

"Good luck," Anora calls after us after a long, long moment of hesitation. "May the Maker watch over you!"

"May He watch over us all," I mutter.

Two ogres later we stand right in front of the large double doors leading to the roof of Fort Drakon and thus to the archdemon. It's only a piece of wood separating us from our destiny.

"Alright, so here we are...." Rori begins, her voice a little too high and trembling. She clears her throat, clenches her fists and straightens. "Oh bloody blast it! It's time to kick the archdemon's ass back to where it came from. Just don't kick too hard. The finishing blow has to be performed by a Grey Warden... or we can start all over again. Got it?"

Zevran raises his hand like in school. "Alas, my sweet Fereldan rose, what if none of you two is left to kill the beast?"

"Then you are totally fucked."

"Ah, I somewhat thought you'd say that," the elf slurs merrily. "Now, my darling Wynne, this is your last chance. There is no reason to deny yourself the pleasure of male companionship, after all, yes? I am right here!" He spreads his arms wide, a huge grin from ear to ear adorning his face as he sways his hips to the rhythm of a music only he can hear.

Wynne's eyes almost pop out of their sockets. For a moment she's slack-jawed. Then, with much effort, she firmly closes her mouth again and her eyes. She inhales deeply as to steady herself. "I am going to walk away now. Calmly. Coolly. This is to save you the pain of having your brain forcibly removed through your ears." She turns on her heels and marches off to stand at the far end of the room. Zevran saunters after her.

"I am so confused. I think I may cry. May I lay my head in your bosom?" he whines, following Wynne across the room when she flees his approach.

Wynne lets out a cry of frustration. "No! No! You may not!"

"But it is a marvelous bosom. I have seen women half your age who have not held up half so well. Perhaps it is a magical bosom?"

"Stop... talking about my bosom! This is a serious moment, a grave moment! We are about to make history!" She beats the lecherous elf over the head with her staff to finally get rid of him, before turning to Rori and me. "Whatever happens now to either of us," she says solemnly, taking one of mine and one of Rori's into her hands. "Know that I am proud - infinitely proud - to have called both of you 'friend'."

"I'm the one to feel honoured and proud and lucky and... oh bloody blast it!" Rori just hugs the older woman tight. "Don't you dare to die, Wynne!"
"If I had a granny, I'd want her to be like you," I mutter as I get my cheeks pinched.

"Onward then!" Wynne shoos us away when tears begin to sting in her eyes. "And may the Maker smile fortune upon us."

"Well, this is it, kiddos," Oghren grunts. "I sodding salute you!" He lifts his flask and downs whatever is left in it. "Let's show them our hearts and then - show them theirs. Come on here, kiddos, let old Oghren give you a hug!" He hugs me - briefly - then hugs Rori - his face pressed right at her bosom - until she stomps on his foot to have him let go of her.

"So the archdemon is next, is it?" Shale sighs as she shoves Oghren aside with a twist of her wrist. "I am... glad it will end here, but also apprehensive. I would almost say I feel concerned for something other than myself. Even maybe for a soft squishy companion... and her whiny appendix. But that would be silly, wouldn't it?"

"Thank you Shale, I appreciate the thought," Rori grins, knocking her knuckles against the golem's broad stony chest.

"The appendix is somewhat touched, too," I chuckle.

"And, err... do try not to get swallowed whole. If the beast would have flyed about afterwards and poop it out, irony would dictate that it would land on me." Shale pauses, a shudder running through her. "I couldn't take it."

"I'd never do that to you," Rori promises, smiling affectionately at the talking statue.

"So time to say hello to the archdemon, my dear friends!" Standing between us Zevran wraps his arms around Rori's and my waist. "And do watch your back. No getting eaten - unless you think it's really important of course."

"I thought it was your job to watch our backs," Rori teases.

"Indeed, that's what I'm here for." He presses a kiss to Rori's cheek, then smacks her and my hindquarters, making us both jump.

I inhale deeply. "Ready?" I ask, my palms pressed against the door. Rori shakes her head, pulling me close for a kiss. She has a way to keep my spirits high. I press her flush against me, wrapping my arms around her tightly. Her soft lips move against mine, her tongue feels like hot velvet in my mouth, engaging mine in a sensual dance. She tastes of sage and the scent of verbena lingers on her despite all the blood and gore and sweat. She clings to me when the kiss ends, her breath brushing gently against my skin as she whispers in my ear.

"My mother decided to give up her life when she stayed with my dying father. I never understood until now. Jory was a coward in my eyes, but now I am here, I realize how he felt about leaving behind his wife and unborn child. Isolde sacrificed her people to keep what she loves most in this world. I shouldn't have judged her. We have more in common than I want to admit..." Rori leans back to look me in the eyes, her blue orbs filled with the warmth of her love and with a deep felt sorrow. "I love you, Alistair. Everything I do, I do it for you."

"Ditto," I whisper hoarsely, my voice not sounding like my own. Morrigan's words echo in my mind. Blast, we really should have gone to Orlais when we still got the chance.

"Well, good thing we talked about it." Rori's grin looks rather forced, a failing attempt to hide her mortal fear. "Now, let the archdemon feel the power of love!"
"You still got that rose?" I laugh on kicking the door open. Maker! I do sound like having hysterics!
Chapter Notes

So this is it. The last chapter. I do hope you enjoyed reading. Thank you very much for following Rori and Alistair through this story. Über-big thanks to Notevensorry and Erusel for their awesome art. Thanks to Notevensorry for her pre-reads. Thank you all for all the lovely comments, for your support, for some extra ideas, for the kuddos. Thanks to the bookmarkers and subscribers.

After this final chapter there will be two bonus chapters. One about the Redcliffe battle (I felt there was something missing after rereading the whole story) and one for the Gnawed Noble. The Redcliffe one I will post right after this final chapter. It will take the position of Chapter 10 - Castle of the Walking Dead.

Will be marked 'completed' once the Gnawed Noble bonus chapter is done.

"It looked somewhat smaller last time I saw it. Less ugly, too. And it was pink."

"You were high on deep mushrooms."

"That explains a lot."

The archdemon is a huge beast, maggots crawling beneath its rotten skin, puss and ichor dripping from its wounds, hissing like acid when hitting the ground. It is spiked by several arrows but its worst wound is on its back, reaching from its neck to its tail where Riordan sunk in his blade. The arm of a soldier got caught between the beast's teeth, dangling from its mouth as if waving his Goodbye! at us whenever the archdemon roars.

It seems like an eternity but we actually only burst through the door a moment ago, witnessed how the beast made short work of some very brave and now very dead soldiers and then turned towards us. It spat the owner of the arm at us, almost knocking me over. This is a very very angry archdemon and killing it won't be a walk in the park despite it being injured. I'd wet my pants if I had time for being afraid. As it is I am far too busy staying alive to worry about dying.

Right now Rori, Barkley and I are seeking cover behind a low wall while the archdemon breathes blue fire upon us.

There's blood and ichor everywhere around us, corpses or parts of corpses litter the floor, smashed and broken, ripped apart or burnt... I really do not want to take a closer look or think about it. I'd run for the hills, screaming, if I did.

"It really can't stand us," I observe, holding my shield over our heads for more protection against the heat of the archdemon's fiery breath.

"The feeling is mutual," Rori snorts, angrily examining her scorched hair. "One year to grow it back and now look what this oversized lizard did!"

"Rori, if it's only your hair it sets on fire you can call yourself damn lucky," I chuckle. That's what
she gets for wearing no helmet.

"It scorched yours, too..."

"WHAT!?" I feel around on my head with my free hand. "Did it ruin my hair style? How bad is it? Do I have a bald spot? Maker! Tell me this is not true!" Blast! That's what I get for wearing no helmet.

"Do you want to sit there all day and mourn your hair?" Wynne shouts at us, running past while firing spells at the dragon.

"Talk is cheap, Wynne!" Rori retorts. "You still got all your hair... A distraction would be nice... Whoa! Alistair!"

The archdemon's head appears right above us - only we can't see it until it's too late and the beast's jaws clench around my shield, lifting shield and me off the ground. I am stuck with my arm, unable to let go and the blasted dragon shakes its huge head, swinging me like a dead cat while I shriek like a stuck pig. And I don't have a sword because I dropped it to check on my hair.

Marvellous!

My arm feels as if getting ripped off and every time the beast swings to the left I can see the arm of the soldier sticking out between its teeth, waving at me frantically.

Oh happy day!

"HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELP!"

"Alistair! Hang on!" Rori shouts as she charges the beast.

Really, what does she think I am doing?

"Alistair, my royal friend, never say die!" Zevran chimes in merrily.

With friends like that, who needs enemies?

"HUUUUUURRRRRYYYYYYYY! ARRRRGRHHHHH!"

Finally Shale rips one of the statues at the gates off its dais and hauls it towards the archdemon, hitting the side of its head. Roaring it lets go of me and I slam down on Oghren trying to catch me. Oghren grunts when I roll off him. Ignoring the pain in my dislocated shoulder, I lunge forward, grab my sword from Rori and hit at the beast's legs before it remembers I'm actually there. For now it blasts balls of blue fire at Shale and the golem returns the favour by having the second statue follow the first.

I dive sideways to dodge the head of the statue crushing down, and the archdemon flaps its mighty wings, sending the elf and ginger down as it flees to the other side of the tower.

"Hey, little pike-twirler, your arm looks funny," Oghren observes, poking my shield arm uselessly dangling at my side.

Before we run towards the other side of the tower, Wynne takes care of my shoulder, sending a sharp pain down my arm. I wince and whine and Rori presses a peck to my cheek and pats my shoulder - the hurting one - absentmindedly as she regards the dragon thoughtfully.
"We do need a plan..."

Rori's plan is as simple as it is suicidal. I doubt it actually deserves to be named a plan. Let's call it desperate measures. We all charge at once from different angles. Wynne stays in the background and blasts the few battle spells she knows at the beast. I never thought I would ever miss Morrigan but her elemental magic would come in handy right now. Especially since the archdemon of course chooses me as a target. Not that big a surprise since I am a Grey Warden. Sure, there's Rori but she looks like a pipsqueak next to me. She's the niblet, I'm the main course. Archdemon logic.

So I am busy not to get fried and eaten while Oghren just hurries past me, chopping at the archdemon's legs. Shale is hit by its tail but instead of sending her flying, she clings to it, giving Rori the chance to climb on top of the beast and stab her blades into the already bleeding flesh at its back.

The archdemon throws its head back and roars in pain. It soars into the air with Rori still on its back, slumping down at the other side of the tower again. Angrily it snaps its jaws at her, craning its neck to get hold of her, wiggling its tail the same time to throw her off. Rori just clings to the hilts of her swords and keeps her head low.

Small but feisty. This will teach the archdemon a lesson it won't forget.

This also is the best opportunity we had so far to actually aim a decent blow or two. Distracted by Rori the archdemon doesn't pay any attention to what's happening at its front. Too bad that's exactly when its darkspawn minions appear to finally help their boss.

Thankfully Eamon, Irving and Kardol with his buddies arrive the same time to start a mass brawl. Irving stands in the doorway, leaning on his staff for support. "Stairs," he croaks, already summoning his magic. "I knew there would be stairs!"

"Ha! You whine like the little-pike twirler, shivelling simp he is," Oghren chuckles.

Mental note to myself: Pee into Oghren's drink whenever I get a chance - if I ever get a chance. Right now I am involuntarily giving a Genlock a piggyback ride. I try to shake it off, it tries to bite my throat, pulling my head back by my hair to get access to my neck. I let myself fall backwards and it finally lets go. That's when a shriek appears out of nowhere. I roll off the Genlock and the shriek's claws dig into its fellow darkspawn.

"Why do you occasionally refer to Alistair as a little pike-twirler?" Wynne wonders aloud while beating the blasted shriek over the head with her staff.

"Why? Has the little pike-twirler taken offence?" Oghren shouts, chopping off the legs of darkspawn as if he was cutting down trees.

The little pike-twirler meanwhile is busy avoiding to get trampled by the archdemon. It bucks like a horse and sends Rori flying like a girl-sized canon ball, tossed towards the edge of the tower.

"Rori!" I dart forward in a desperate attempt to catch her before she sails over the edge, but a Genlock trips me up - only to get stomped down by the golem a heartbeat later. Shale elbows her way across the battlefield, a mass of stone in stampede trampling anything in her way. Roaring she leaps into the air, turns in her jump and with outstretched arms plucks Rori out of the air just in time before she falls off the tower. The impact sends both woman and statue down. Rori hits the ground hard, quickly rolling aside when the floor gives way and Shale is stuck to her waist. While I still wonder how we ever will get her out of that hole again, the archdemon locks its jaws around the golem and pulls it out. Rori just in time scrambles away, crawling on hands and knees. One hand pressed to her belly, she collapses, cringing in pain. The archdemon quickly figures that swinging
Shale around doesn't really work and when it spits the golem out some dragon teeth clatter to the ground.

Meanwhile the granny mage and the dwarf discuss my pike-twirling habits. Really, it's none of their business when, where and how often I twirl my pike! And don't they have a pile of things to do?

"It's just a curious description" Wynne shouts, jumping over me still lying on the ground. The archdemon has taken refuge on the far side of the tower, a huge gap in the ground preventing our approach. Rori is back to her feet but swaying so badly, she slumps down again several times before she finally manages to join us. I want to take care of her. But there's just too many darkspawn pressing in on us. So although she looks like fainting, she raises her blades and defends herself. The leather of her pants has turned darker at her thighs as if it was wet.

"Curious?" Oghren snorts, turning like a spin top armed with a battle axe. "Bah, it's entirely true. What, you haven't seen him twirling his pike?"

Sure, go on talking about me as if I wasn't there! And all that while the world is ending and darkspawn is flooding the top of the blasted tower and we fight our last stand and try to figure out how to get to that thrice-cursed darkspawn boss. Shale offers to toss us all across the gap but Rori, still rather green in the face, refuses. Groaning, she clutches her belly but stops me with a wave of her hand when I start fussing. Well, as much as you can fuss with a shriek determined to rip your guts out.

"Goes at it when he thinks no one's watching," Oghren chuckles as he explains my weird pike-twirling habits to the granny mage in between slaying our enemies. "Knocks about in the trees like there's no tomorrow." Oghren himself knocks about amongst the darkspawn and there for sure is no tomorrow for them. "Caught him just the other day. Blushed all the way down to his navel, then couldn't find his shirt. I swear he's going to hurt himself one of these days, the way he works that thing."

"Hey!" I mutter sullenly. "All this pressure and tension. A man has to find a way to release it!" And try to skulk off with a royal guard stuck at your heels! I once dipsy-doodled through the camp just to see if they would follow my every step. They did. It was rather funny until we all ran into Eamon... He can be such a spoilsport.

Wynne's face is bright red. All this fighting and running has to be specially exhausting for her being so old. "I don't want to hear this anymore, do I?" she mutters, avoiding to look at me.

"One really should think Rori keeps him entertained..." Zevran wiggles his eyebrows at me and nudges my side, then pirouettes to stab a darkspawn.

"I keep telling him, pikes are for sticking things at long range, aye?" Oghren pants when pulling his axe free from a darkspawn's skull. "Horses and such. Not for twirling like a sissy-girl."

"HEY! I don't twirl like a sissy-girl! A pike is a very manly weapon! And I handle it like a man!" I pout while slamming my shield against a shriek when Rori sends it stumbling backwards. It stumbles again, forwards this time and right onto Rori's blade.

"Especially one like yours. So long and hard," Zevran groans. He sounds ecstatic.

"I could show you how to handle it," I offer in between decapitating a Genlock and fending off his frenzied buddies.

"Yes, please." Somehow I don't like the way the elf grins at me. "I wouldn't mind to be stabbed."
"Wait, you're talking about an actual pike?" Wynne squeaks, her spell going amiss and accidentally blasting off a chunk of the wall. It comes crashing down on a shriek. "Like a spear?"

"Obviously. What else would I be talking about?" Oghren wonders.

"I can't imagine," the granny mage mutters.

I can't either but Zevran is laughing so hard, he topples over, saving his own life as the two darkspawn trying to run him through now run each other through.

"We don't need pikes, we need missiles!" Rori shouts. "The ballistas! Hurry!"

We hurry but Rori winces with every step she takes. One hand pressed to her belly, she curses under her breath as she grits her teeth against the pain.

"Does anybody know how to handle a ballista?" I ask when we all stand in front of one. The answer is no. So it takes us some time to actually figure out how it works and some more time until we get the right aim. Enough time for Wynne to doctor up Rori. Afterwards the granny mage is as pale as her patient.

"Alistair..." I am trying to adjust a ballista and fend off darkspawn at the same time. Whatever Wynne wants, it can't be as urgent as she makes it sound. I can hardly look over my shoulder before the next darkspawn. Rori has grabbed Wynne by her arm, beseeching the older woman while she stabs, kicks, hits at darkspawn - whatever works to keep the beasts at bay. I prick my ears but over the noise of the battle I cannot make any sense of their conversation.

"You kept saying I was here for a higher purpose." Rori says sadly when the blasted darkspawn gives us some rest. The next already make their way up the slope and get greeted by Shale and Barkley. "That the life of one individual doesn't matter, that I don't matter..."

"You have a responsibility, you are a..." Wynne begins.

"... Grey Warden," Rori interrupts, turning her back on the mage. "Is the missile ready? Let's salute this blasted beast in a way it will never forget."

"Ten, nine, eight...," Zevran counts down when the ballista is ready.

"Ready, steady, go!" I cut him short. We really don't have time to waste on that many numbers.

The first missile we shoot high into the air. The second crashes into the ground, almost spiking poor Irving. All the while darkspawn keeps charging.

When the third missile finally hits home we all cheer. Well, not the archdemon. It certainly doesn't think this is funny.

"What happens if we kill it that way?" Rori wonders. Her face is ashen, Wynne's magic pulses around her, a faint magical glow surrounding her head to toe. Whatever spell Wynne wove, it is powerful. Very, very powerful. Whatever dispute Rori had with Wynne, she settled it. The granny mage doesn't look happy, though. Not at all. "Does it count when a Grey Warden handles the ballista?"

"No clue." I shrug. "Rori, are you alright? I mean, as alright as you can be when face to face with a gigantic corrupted dragon housing the soul of an old god."

"As good as can be expected under the circumstances." Rori confirms. She smiles at me. It is meant
to be one of these wide beaming smiles but turns out weak and pained.

"Rori..."

"We are Grey Wardens, Alistair. We do whatever is necessary to fight the darkspawn. There's no turning back now. It's too late for the Orlesian leave and eating cake."

She of course is right. I still feel terrible. Considering we are overrun by darkspawn, terrible seems very appropriate. Add a feeling of looming doom, yes, it all fits nicely. I really got better things to do than wondering about what Rori keeps secret. I'm not dumb, you know. Not all the time. But I'd have to talk to her to find out and shouting at each other across the battlefield won't do. I am tempted to shake Rori until she spits out whatever information she hides. Instead I shake a darkspawn, hitting its head against a nearby wall repeatedly.

Until now all I could think about was, well, nothing. Instinct took over as soon as we reached the top of Fort Drakon. It was all about staying alive, fight, move, no time for thinking when there's no time for elaborated decisions. I am so exhausted, pure adrenaline is all that keeps me going. And Wynne's magic. My heart is thundering painfully against my ribcage, every breath I take fills my lungs with liquid heat.

A second missile hits the archdemon, boring deeply into its flesh - and for the first time I realize we have a chance. We can bring him down and that means...

Merciful Andraste!

Morrigan's warning echoes in my mind and with it the fear returns.

Rori mustn't slay the archdemon. It's a matter of life and death.

"Seems we will find out if Morrigan's cheat works," Rori whispers next to me, sounding as scared as I feel.

With much effort the archdemon lifts itself from its exposed position and slumps down on a platform to the left. It roars in agony and fury,

"Did she say something about it?" I ask nervously, running down the slope. The archdemon has summoned as many darkspawn as still alive to defend it, forming a ring of protection around their boss.

"Not to me." Rori squints her eyes. She's not the only one here withholding information.

With much effort the archdemon lifts itself from its exposed position and slumps down on a platform to the left. It roars in agony and fury,

"What?" we croak in unison, grinning stupidly at each other. I beckon her to speak first, she does the same with me and we both go: "Nevermind."

"Well, good thing we talked about it." Rori's grin is caught somewhere in between maniacal and frightened. I'd give her a hug if not for all the darkspawn. She'd need one. Maker, I'd need one!

Actually everybody here looks as if they needed a hug. Well, not the darkspawn, of course.

The archdemon is hopping mad. Rori and I make several dipsy-doodles to avoid getting fried by the blue fire the archdemon breathes at us. Irving and Wynne create a curtain fire of magic missiles raining down on our opponents. Zevran is at my right side, doubling like a rabbit and laughing madly as he cuts down anything in reach. A shriek stops his suicidal rush, engaging the elf in a whirlwind
fight of blades and claws.

Shale flings any darkspawn she gets hold off over the edge of the tower. Oghren has joined the Legion of the Dead, backing us up. Rori dives forward, sliding across the floor when the archdemon snaps at her. Coming to a halt beneath its belly, she stabs upwards, then quickly rolls to the side when the dragon slumps down to squish her.

"For the Grey Wardens!" I shout, slashing the side of the archdemon's neck when it turns to go after Rori. It's head whips back towards me and I find myself face to face with the beast. Pressed against its side there's no escape. The foul stench of the beast's breath is worse than anything I have ever smelled before. And travelling with Sten, Oghren and Barkley, I have smelled a whole lot of real bad odours. Not to mention my socks. But this... this has me almost faint... Not that I got much time to worry about the foul stench. When the dragon's jaws clench around my body, the stench really is the very last thing I actually worry about.

My first thought when I get lifted off the ground: Not again!

The archdemon scrunches on me - Goodbye shiny splendiferous armour! - it's teeth pierce through the metal and all I can do is flail around with my sword helplessly and shriek. It's squishing me slowly, not like a beast acting on instinct. No, this is a vengeful god and it wants the insipid mortal to suffer for his hybris.

The air is squeezed out of my lungs, pain circles through my whole body and I see stars dancing in front of my eyes. I gurgle and choke, blood spluttering from my mouth. Suddenly Rori appears in sight, sitting on top of the archdemon's head. Her dagger raised, she pokes it right into the archdemon's eye when it squints to get a look at her.

The beast roars and I drop to the ground like a stone. The soldier's severed arm lands on top of me. And then Rori. The archdemon throws its head back and shakes if furiously. Rori's dagger - formerly Duncan's - protrudes from its eye and the beast paws at it, only pushing it in deeper.

I don't know how I get back to my feet. Every step I take is agony, every time I lift my arm, a bolt of hot pain shoots upwards into my shoulder. My head is spinning, blood is flowing down my face from a gash at my forehead. I see red, literally. It's blinding me and I have to pull off my gauntlets to wipe the blood from my eyes. And still I charge. I roar in despair and fury, a battle cry to encourage myself, to drive my body forwards when it refuses to function. I stumble and fall when the archdemon pushes me. It steps onto my leg and I can feel the bones crack...

Blast!

I don't give a damn that big boys don't cry. I start bawling.

I'm not the only one.

Tears are streaming down Rori's face. The dark wetness has stained her pants down to her knees. She clutches her sword with both hands, wielding it as if it weighed a ton. She sinks her blade into the archdemon's chest and the beast tumbles backwards. It smacks us both with its tale, sending us scattering across the ground. I slam against a wall. Rori slams into me.

My vision goes black. Okay, so this is it then? I'm dying, right? I'm so damn cold, chilled to the bone and deeper. Then the pain fades into a dull ache, a warmth engulfs me and there's a distant light beckoning me...

"Alistair! Don't you dare die on me!"
POOF! Light gone. I force my eyes open and a crooked smile to form around my lips. Rori's pale face is hovering right above me, dark shadows under her eyes give away how exhausted she is. Her breathing is ragged, her hands trembling when she pulls me against her.

"Don't you dare die on me," she repeats, her voice choked. "It's over. You can't die now when it's over."

First I don't get what she means. All around us the battle is still raging and yet it seems so distant. Maker, I'm so dizzy. I've hit my head far too often today. Not to mention my intestines feel like all squished and mashed. Several ribs are broken, one poking my lungs nastily. Not to die sounds much like mission impossible right now.

It's hard to focus on anything - but then my eyes catch sight of the dragon. It's lying on the ground, spasms running through its body as its legs twitch in the useless attempt to get back to its feet. A pool of black ichor is forming around it, wiggling maggots included.

"We've done it," Rori whispers. "You stay here while I finish it - and you better still be there when I return!" She doesn't sound half as cocksure as she wants me to believe. Her tears betray her as does the angst in her eyes.

"Rori... you mustn't..." I croak, blood spluttering from my mouth. She leans in to kiss me gently, her lips smeared with my blood when she puts me down gently. "No!" I reach out for her but she is already gone, rushing towards the archdemon. Her first steps are wavering, then she straightens and her composure changes. Strength, determination, grace. Her heart is beating so fast as if it was about to leap out of her chest... Oh, wait, that's mine. Seems I'm not as dead as I feel. Panic drives me back to my feet - and sends me right down again. Maker! I forgot about that broken leg. The pain almost has me faint. Come on, Alistair! Pull yourself together! You cannot swoon like a damsel in distress when your woman is about to slay the archdemon! Who needs legs to walk when one can crawl? "Rori! No! You mustn't! Let me..."

The wind whips at her hair, the sky has turned blood red, grey clouds looming above her. She grabs a sword sticking out of a fallen darkspawn, holding it with both hands as she moves on - as if I hadn't said anything at all.

"Hey! I'm talking to you! ROOOOOOOOOORIIII!"

Finally she slows down and turns towards me, still walking backwards as if she knew she couldn't find the courage to move on should she stop. Our eyes meet for one last time. I can't understand her words, a whisper gone with the wind. I don't have to hear her. I can see it in her eyes, I can feel it in my aching heart.

"I love you, too," I breathe, pulling myself forward, gritting my teeth against the pain. I cannot reach her anymore now. Not unless Shale tossed me. I'd totally go for it. But of course the golem is nowhere to be seen. I still don't give up. I rather die trying. I don't want to kick the bucket without having tried. Rori really is rubbing off on me.

When Rori reaches the archdemon, the beast's eye snaps open. With its last strength it lifts its head off the ground and roaring menacingly, bites at the Grey Warden. She ducks her head, raises her sword and stabs the dragon's exposed neck, slicing its throat in an upwards motion. Ichor splatters down on her and she quickly somersaults out of the way before the huge head can crash down on her. Gurgling the archdemon twitches, its one eye glinting evilly.

Rori grips her sword with both hands. She's right next to the beast's head, raising the blade high over her head.
I'm almost there... almost... "NOOOOOO!"

Rori rams the sword into the archdemon's skull, her anguish, grief and determination mirrored on her face. She pushes with all her strength, leaning her whole weight onto the hilt to drive the blade through flesh and bones. The skull splits open and a pillar of bright lurid light shoots into the sky. Rori's hands are like glued to the hilt of her sword. She tries to let go but her body is caught in the thundering beam - the sound is... it's like a death cry from a thousand throats, an agonized wail of fury, incredulity and fear. I can hardly hear Rori's high pitched screams over the noise. Or my frantic cries.

Spasms run through Rori's body, having her twitch as if electricity was forced through her. Her eyes roll back in their sockets. Smoke forms around her hands, the stench of burnt flesh, blood and ichor makes me gag. Tears stream down my face as my body is pressed down by the maelstrom of corrupted power surging into the sky faster and faster...

BOOM!

The explosion makes my ears ring, my head feels like exploding itself and if I wasn't already down it would knock me over. Rori is hurtled backwards, slamming into the ground several feet away when a huge cloud of light and dust illuminates the sky. Looks somewhat like a gigantic mushroom...

Afterwards there is a deathly silence. All I hear is my own ragged breathing and my blood rushing in my veins. I'm not sure if I am dead or alive. Couldn't care less, though, when Rori is lying on the ground stock-still, her armour smouldering, her hair smouldering, blisters covering her hands and face.

"Rori!" I croak, crawling as fast as possible to get to her.

Maker! She looks... awful. I sit up - with much groaning and cursing and whining - to cradle her in my arms, holding her against my chest as I cry into her hair - well, what's left of it - and kiss her brow. "Rori, please, don't you die on me. You said you'd be right back," I sob, my lips moving against her skin.

"Also told you to stay over there."

"Rori! Maker's Breath! You're alive!" I laugh out loud - and instantly get poked by that broken rib.

"Duh... not for much longer if you go on squeezing me like that," she groans.

"Merciful Andraste! You... you live! But Morrigan said... she said you'd die slaying the archdemon... Said it was a matter of life and death! Oh, blast it! That nasty witch- bitch!" I cry and laugh and hug her, shower her with kisses, smooch and cuddle her. I'm so relieved, so happy, so ecstatic I don't feel any pain anymore. Well, maybe a little pain but who cares when we are both still alive? And the odds were quite long, right? It's a miracle, that's what it is and I will have to light a whole lot of candles at the Chantry. The Maker truly moves in mysterious ways. Or He's just a sucker for thrillers. "How are you?"

"Well done," Rori retorts, her voice no more than a choked whisper.

"You should have let me perform the killing blow," I scold her, happily nuzzling her nose.

"And listen to you complain about your hair getting ruined endlessly?" She closes her eyes, lying very still in my arms. "I wasn't sure about the ritual. I couldn't take the risk of losing you," she murmurs weakly. Her head sinks against my shoulder as she becomes limp in my arms. Tears stream down her face and she cringes in pain, clasping her belly. "Maker have mercy," she whimpers. "Can
"You forgive me, Alistair?"

"How could I not? You're too pretty not to forgive. Well, not right now, but, you know, in general..." Even in when half-dead Rori manages to swat at me for that. I smile and even smiling hurts. I don't feel much like smiling anyway. I'm just too exhausted to worry about anything, to tired to be afraid... We are both sitting in a puddle of blood. It takes me awfully long to realize it's Rori's. My vision becomes blurry and I begin to tremble. My body is kindly reminding me it has had about enough.

"You don't even know what I am talking about..."

"Hush," I whisper against her scorched hair. "We're alive and together, that's all that matters to me. Hey! There's Wynne! She's going to fix anything that needs fixing. It's over now. And they lived happily ever after..."

"I'm not that sure about the happy part..."

"Shush. Let's just pretend for now."

"Oh, alright... And they lived happily ever after."

"See, that wasn't that hard, was it? Oh and I love you. Always. Just so you know."

"Love you, too. Just so you know."

So this is the story of Alistair and Rori, the Grey Wardens who fight to end the blasted Blight.

I think... I think I'm going to swoon... Now.

Very last thing I hear Rori say is: "Uhm, Alistair, I'm pregnant... or was... kinda..."

Boy, she has some timing!

Chapter End Notes

Can Alistair and Rori save their baby or do they face another tragedy? Will they ever be the happy family Alistair dreams of? Learn about Alistair's struggle to become a good king, about political intrigues and new alliances formed. Be their guest at the royal wedding. Find out how the Grey Wardens react to Rori's survival after slaying the archdemon. Accompany Rori and Alistair to Amarenthine and Kirkwall. Find out the truth about the Calling. Read how Rori tracks down Morrigan and find out about the witch's gift to the monarchs of Ferelden. Follow Alistair on his desperate search for his missing father, King Maric. Can he finally solve the mystery of his mother's true identity? Witness Rori's departure on search for a cure for the Calling, her final adventure should she fail. And Alistair left alone at the brink of yet another catastrophe threatening to destroy Thedas.

Find out about all that and more in Hoping One Day We'll Make a Dream Last, Part 2 of the Roristair Series. (Notevensorry says the series title is blah and I can think of a better one. So the title could change but for now it has to do.)
Art by Erusel

Chapter Notes

The next two chapters are Art Collections of art created for this story by the two super fantastic artists Erusel and Notevensorry so that you don't have to click through the whole story to find their art.

The next story chapter will hopefully be done by the end of next week. Until then, enjoy the art, and check out the girls' tumblr accounts. Erusel has added some real awesome Dragon Age fanart recently, especially Solavellan.

Collection of Art by Erusel

Fabulous Erusel created lots of amazingly beautiful art for this story. More of her awesomeness can be found here:
http://onehundred-fandoms.tumblr.com/
Rori Cousland
She has pulled her rainbow coloured striped sock over her hand like a glove puppet.

"Mwahaha! Grey Warden, have you come to try and slay me?" Rori intones in her version of a deep, evil voice.

I can't help grinning when I pick up my Grey Warden doll and its horse. "Archdemon! Your time has come! Prepare to die!"
The moment my length becomes visible to her, Rori freezes and stares. She looks... shocked?

"What? What is wrong?" I ask, alarmed now.

"Nothing...," she says a bit too quickly. I don't believe her. Something is absolutely not okay. One moment she was all over me, now she's looking almost frightened, timid for sure. "It's... everything is fine. I... I just didn't think it would be so very... huge!"

What?

We both stare down at my erection.

"Do you think it's not as it should be? Is there something wrong with it?" I sound as panicked as I feel.
"How should I know?" Rori whines.

Kiss on the butt.
Next thing I stumble over one of Rori's boots - Blasted curses of a thousand misfortunes! Why does she always have to leave those lying around where one just has to trip over them! - and tumble onto the bed, accidentally knocking my head against Rori's nose, causing bright red blood to spurt from it.

„Oh blast! I'm so sorry, kitten!“

A sharp knock at the door makes us both jump. Even more so when said door is thrust open right afterwards and in storms Cullen in full plate armor, all agitated and torn and so utterly tormented he's close to tears.

„Alistair...“ he gasps. „Your... your Highness... I... I need your help... now... oh Maker!... please don't let it be too late!... We have to hurry!“ That's when he finally realizes what his eyes make him see, namely Rori naked but for her panties with her nose bleeding heavily and I naked but for my pants and both of us in bed together. „What in the name of the Maker are you doing there?“
Shock has us frozen to the spot, so Rori’s reaction is time-delayed. You can totally see it dawn on her slowly as she gawks at Cullen, that realization that he is here when he shouldn’t be and she is there totally not wearing anything to decently cover her. With a startled squeak, she pulls the blanket all over her head.

„What in the name of the Maker are you doing here?“ she wails from beneath the blanket.

I don't have time for being mortified. I just desperately, hurriedly try to stuff everything back into my pants that is currently poking out of them rather stiffly.

„Did you hit her?“ Whatever had Cullen so upset that he came running to me in the middle of the night, he's knight and gentleman enough to forget about it instantly when there is a damsel in distress.
When I wake this time, I find my beloved ginger sitting on a stone next to the brook, dangling her feet into the water.

Maker’s Breath!

She wears a wreath of white flowers and green leaves on her head, an equal garland is wound around her hips. Her naked body is painted with red clay, a small stripe runs across the brink of her nose, two more adorn her cheekbones at both sides of her face. Two muddy handprints smudge the pale flesh of her breasts, two more can be found on her buttocks and at her waist. Merciful Andraste, she looks like a sprit of the forest, a dryad from the old myths and legends and her mere sight arouses me. When she turns at the sound of my astonished gasp, an impish smile curves her lips and mischief sparkles in her eyes.
Art by Notevensorry

Collection of Art by Notevensorry

Pretty awesome Notevensorry created a whole lot of adorkably fantastic art for this story. You can find even more of her beautiful art here:

http://noimnotevensorry.tumblr.com/
http://maybealittlesorry.tumblr.com/

Rori Cousland
The moment my length becomes visible to her, Rori freezes and stares. She looks... shocked?

"What? What is wrong?" I ask, alarmed now.
I lean against the door as nonchalantly and casually as I can possibly manage when I open my breeches and reach into my leather pants. Maker's Breath, I cannot believe I am doing this! I cannot believe this is happening. It's like one of Zevran's stories having come true. It's kinda awkward, but also thrilling and so hot. When I free my erection from my pants, Rori sits up and stares, totally forgetting about what she was doing while she watches me run my hand up and down my shaft...
I sit in a private cabin in my tub all alone, pushing the wooden soap dish and the brush around on the water like little ships while I try not to think about my recent encounter with two women...
Bonus Chapter - The Gnawed Noble

Chapter Notes

An early Christmas goodie for all my faithful readers.

A very silly fun chapter for all those who are dying to know what really happened at the Gnawed Noble and how Alistair got his griffon tattoo on his buttocks.

Thanks to Notevensorry for correcting my French/Orlesian.

"Hot in here, isn't it?" Zevran grins.

With some effort I manage to nod. My hand reaches for yet another of these ridiculously thin and high glasses attached to an even thinner stem that ends in a flat foot. Leliana calls it a champagne flute. It is filled with a yellowish liquid that reminds me a lot of... uhm... piss... sparkling piss. The taste is equivalent to its looks.

This is my sixth glass... or my seventh... and I still feel far too sober. Next time the tray passes by I take two glasses at once because that's when Rori emerges from the changing room - alright, it's more Leliana shoving her while Rori desperatedly tries to hide behind the curtain.

"Now what do you say?" Leliana chirps, dragging Rori along.

"Caramba!" Zevran exclaims, nudging my side. "Alistair, my dear friend, you are some lucky bastard! Finest Orlesian lingerie on a beautiful Fereldan rose. International understanding can be so easy."

Rori is breathtakingly beautiful - despite her face burning red with embarrassment and the fading bruises still visible at her thighs, arms and neck. Her vulnerability just makes her even more beautiful. I want to smother her with hugs and kisses and tell her everything will be alright and I will protect her from every harm. On any other woman her attire would look like she'd stumbled right out of the Pearl. On Rori it's just...

Excuse me while I gawk.

She wears a black laced bra that has a very interesting push up effect and a wisp of nothing that Leliana graciously calls smallclothes. Well, small it is.

Like my own garment. But at least it's not as small as the elf's. He calls it a thong. I never wanted to know such things exist.

How I got here? Didn't I mention?

Well, Rori doesn't fit into her underwear anymore and so she decided she needed to go shopping. As practical as she is when it comes to her outfit, she has a thing for Orlesian lingerie. Nothing I complain about - although the bras are awfully tricky to open. Anyway, she dragged me to this shop where she bought her kitten costume and that's where we ran into Leliana and Zevran. Or they ran into us. We didn't even know they were here when we entered the shop - more like when Rori shoved me in - because apparently there's a back room. And that's where we are now.
There our rather tipsy and half-naked companions teamed up with the clerk - I still don't know if this person is a man or a woman despite him... her... wearing almost nothing. And I always thought Morrigan's way to dress was scandalous.

"Gorgeous!" The clerk claps his/her hands at the sight of my thoroughly mortified fellow Warden. Rori just grabs the thin glasses from me and downs one after another, pulling a face at the taste.

"Would you like to try..." the clerk suggests.

"NO!" Rori squeaks. "I take this one, thank you."

"I could show you our special collection."

Rori and I shriek "NO!" same time Leliana and Zevran go "Yes!"

Unfortunately Rori and I aren't quick enough so the clerk with a wide dirty grin locks the door before we as much as picked up our pants and then we find out that there's a back room behind the back room.

"Maker preserve me!" I gasp while Rori starts looking around for her lock picks. If she doesn't find them anytime soon, I will kick down the door.

"Fereldans are so finnicky!" Zevran rolls his eyes as he saunters past us into the... whatever. It reminds me of Fort Drakon, to be honest. There's a whole lot of things attached to the walls that look like they could be hurtful. Whips and some kind of paddles and floggers and long sticks and a whole shelf with... err... golem control rods. The... uhm... clothing is mostly leather. Very shiny leather.

Leliana squeals in delight at the sight of a pair of boots that reach mid-thigh. They are black and shiny and have very thin, very high heels... To me they look like an instrument of torture. Or a deadly weapon. I bet you could stab someone easily with that heel. And I very much doubt it fits with the official outfit for Chantry sisters.

"That has a hole." Rori mutters as she holds up the smallclothes the clerk shoves into her hands. There indeed is a very prominent hole at the very place where there shouldn't be any hole because that's the part that would mostly require covering.

"And here is the matching bra," the clerk chimes giddily.

"It has two holes," Rori observes, staring wide eyed at the piece of clothing that actually only consists of strings.

"Oh, now that would come in real handy for you and Alistair when you vanish behind the bushes again," Zevran remarks merrily. "Look, here, these pants come with a flap at the crotch..."

Rori turns a brighter shade of pink. "Errr..."

"And for the gentleman." The clerk waves a piece of leather at me.

"Mine has three holes," I mutter, examining the shiny smallclothes. "Two at the back, one at the front." Why would anybody want to wear smallclothes that don't cover your hindquarters but have the buttocks sticking out? And what is that round opening at the front... oh... OH!

"Awesome!" Zevran cheers at the sight of the... thing... in my hands. "Do you have that one in S?"

"Strategic withdrawal," I mutter at Rori. She is already armed with her lock picks.
"Thank you for shopping with us!" the clerk happily calls after us when we flee from the room hurriedly. We both grab the last champagne flutes on our way out, wishing they were filled with something stronger. "We will deliver your purchase within fourteen days."

The door of the shop closes behind us. Rori and I look at each other at the same time with relief. We escaped certain death by a whisker.

"Do I want to know how you got to buy that kitten costume?" I ask, my voice shaking.

"I can't remember half of it." Rori whispers, wide-eyed and shocked. "Did you... were there... did you see anything of... uhm... interest... you know..." she adds in a very small voice as we cross the market place.

"Well, they still sell kitten costumes..." I grin.

"They also sell corsets for men," Rori replies sweetly.

"Little beast."

When we arrive at the Gnawed Noble we're both already a bit tipsy, despite the fish and chips we added to the champagne. We both needed something decently Ferelden after fleeing the Chambers of Horror. I feel much better after some plain fare while Rori got rid of everything exactly in front of Goldanna's door about two minutes after she had wolfed it down. Well, she keeps saying Goldanna makes her want to puke...

"Very innovative, making a place for idiots to gather where they won't be underfoot." Sten greets us when we join our companions inside the tavern. The Qunari looks as if he's planning the invasion that will rid us of all our hideous habits and chaos.

"Nobles all around the world are all the same. Drinking overpriced swill and talking about their clothes." Oghren grunts as he suspiciously eyes the shiny glass the waitress puts down in front of him.

"Ahhh, plum wine!" Wynne rubs her hands giddly before reaching for the crystal decanter that arrived with the glasses.

"That's quite an important topic. Fine feather make fine birds," Leliana chirps joyously, snatching the filled glass from Wynne. She feels completely at home here. "Look at what that woman's wearing! Is she drunk or does she just have bad taste?" Leliana wrinkles her nose at the sight of Bann Esmerelle of Amaranthine - according to Rori's Who's Who in Ferelden - wearing a bright green... err... It looks as if someone sewed very wide pants and a blouse together, a bit like the things babies wear, and decorated it all with too much flitter quillings.

"Birds are never fine," Shale booms. "Evil beasts of the sky, that's what they are. The sister should stop talking about them. Better challenge someone to arm-wrestle me. That would be fun."

"I very much doubt we can find someone stupid enough..." Rori begins, her voice fading when her cousin James bursts in through the door, wearing a rather revealing bright red woman's dress.

"That bitch stole my clothes!" he whines as he slumps down next to Rori, a sour look on his handsome face.

"Who?"

"Isabela!" Jamie sulks, crossing his arms in front of his chest sullenly. He reeks of booze worse than
Oghren. "At least red is my colour." He admiringly runs his fingers across the satin of the dress.

"Lost a game of Wicked Grace, my friend?" Zevran chuckles, ruffling Jamie's brown hair. Any closer and the elf is going to sit on his lap.

"Maybe you have more luck with arm wrestling?" Shale suggests hopefully.

James beams stupidly, a gleam of drunken mirth in his dark brown eyes. "Sure, why not?"

"Uhm, Jamie, she's a golem..." Rori points out.

"She's a girl!" James Mac Eanraig corrects her, breathing the sour stench of ale into our faces. "Puny version of a golem."

"You do recall you just got defeated by a girl playing cards?" I wonder out loud.

James waves me off. "Cards, that's where a girl can win by cheating. Arm-wrestling is something totally different. It's for real men." He rolls up his sleeve and wiggles his fingers testingly. "Ready for your defeat, rocky maiden?"

"There's no fool like a drunken fool. My mother told me that once and I see 'tis true." Morrigan sighs. For once we do agree.

"James..." Rori grabs her cousin's arm and tries to drag him away. When that doesn't work she offers to buy him as many drinks as he can drink before passing out. The ultimative proof that blood is thicker than water.

James wags his head. He's not hopeless it seems as he's at least considering. That's when Oghren shouts: "HEY! LOOK AT THAT CRAZY NUG-HUMPER ARM-WRESTLING A GOLEM!"

Within the blink of an eye we have a mostly male, mostly drunken audience and Zevran spontaneously starts a new carreer as a bookie.

"He won't, will he?" Leonas Bryland asks worriedly.

"Never, doesn't have the balls," Bann Franderel of West Hill laughs.

"WHATCHA SAY MY SON DON'T HAVE NO BALLS, YA DUNG BRAINED GOAT HERDER!" Angus Mac Eanraig roars.

"James..." Rori beseeches her cousin but now of course he is stuck. They'll call him a whining sissy for the rest of his life if he backs out now. It's a male thing. Reason got nothing to do with it.

"Shush, lass." Jaime shoos her away, all cocksure. He rests his elbow on the table and locks eyes with the golem. Shale's hand closes around his. James' head becomes very, very red by the effort to endure the pain and suppress a scream. He lasts about three seconds. Then... well, let's just say: Don't try this at home, kids!

Or anywhere else.

Not that anybody pays much attention to Jamie's crushing defeat, his personal Ostagar. Okay, Vaughan Kendells does pay far too much attention, fascinated by what happens to Jamie's hand and arm... Did I already say not to try that at home? Most other nobles are involved in a brawl that started between Angus Mac Eanraig and Bann Franderel when the later replied: "Like father, like son."

Now Mac Eanraig is determined to show anybody that he has balls the size of a prize-winning
pumpkin.

He punches Franderel straight in the face and the bann gets thrown backwards, knocking Bann Darby's drink out of his hands and spilling it all over Bann Loren's fine linen shirt. So Loren shoves Darby and he swings his fist against Loren, Loren slips and the punch hits Esmerelle instead. She comes upon him like a fury. Then some personal guards feel somewhat obliged to their lieges and while James still rolls around on the ground, whining and clutching what is left of his arm, the whole tavern is involved in a decent brawl.

Well, not Rori and I. We sit savely under a table and as we got nothing else to do anyway, we canoodle a bit. And a bit more. Much more. No! Not that much more! Maker!

Before anybody gets killed, Rori - much to my dismay - decides we've done enough fraternizing and canoodling and has Shale shake a barrel with champagne before punching a hole in. The assembled nobility of Ferelden gets all showered with Orlesian swill. That's a cool down for the firebrands.

Standing on the table that has given her cover, Rori whistles on her finger. "Listen everyone! Let's storm the wine cellars! Charge it to Prince Alistair's bill!" She slaps my back, I grin foolishly and wave, looking like a complete retard.

There's a roar from several throats and the thundering of even more feet clomping off towards the wine cellar. I'd love to go, too, because I feel I'm still far too sober to endure this, but Rori drags me along to talk to all those who stayed behind and obviously won't be impressed by a free drink or two.

Arl Bryland, sitting with Bann Alfstanna, looks as if he dearly regretted not having followed the mob into the cellar."Alors Papa, you cannot expect me to appear at the ball in these rags!" his teenage daughter cries. "Je ne suis pas tendance!"

"Don't worry, Habren," Rori smirks. "There's not going to be a ball."

"Girls!" Arl Bryland groans. He obviously is used to the cat fight taking place. "Good to see you, Rori. You have my deepest sympathy for what happened to your parents. I never had a better friend than Bryce. He was a great man."

"Thank you, Uncle Leonas," Rori whispers hoarsely.

"There's always a ball after a Landsmeet," Habren sneers, sticking out her tongue at Rori.

"Girls!" Bryland sounds desperate.

"Ugly duckling like you of course wouldn't know," Habren keeps bawling Rori out. Their fathers used to be best friends, the daughters are archenemies. "Have you ever tried to do something against these freckles? It looks as if your face was sprinkled with something unmentionable..."

"... cute," I complete Habrens sentence, earning myself the widest grin I have seen on Rori's face for days. She even squeals a bit before kissing me with such a fierce passion, she leaves me completely breathless. Several flutes of champagne and some glasses of plum wine and I couldn't care less about any audience.

What can I say? I'm a daredevil. ROOOAR!

My ravishing ginger is so prettily flushed, her lips swollen, her hair a bit tousleed, I just have to kiss her again. And again. Maker's Breath! We go on like this, we better should get a room!

"There's rumours about a Theirin prince," Habren goes on sourly, talking loud enough for the whole
"They say he's handsome. And he could become king. I do have to be the most beautiful woman at the ball. Don't you think a king would make a suitable husband for me, Papa? Kings are rich, aren't they?"

"Don't bother," Rori grins, her arm wrapped around my waist, mine around her shoulder. "He's a man with exquisite taste."

"In that case, it is you who shouldn't bother," Habren hisses and Rori looks like the cat that swallowed the pigeon.

"Habren, may I introduce Prince Alistair Theirin to you?" she says so sweetly, her words sound sticky.

"Didn't you say, he has exquisite taste?" By the look on Habren's face, she's about to scratch Rori's eyes out and the other way round.

"GIRLS!" Arl Bryland and I cry in unison, both equally exasperated.

"Habren, mon coeur, why don't you go shopping?" Bryland sighs, reaching for his purse.

"There's nothing interesting there! Denerim is such a backwater!"

"There has to be something you want. You always want something," Bryland mutters resignedly.

That's when Habren spots Shale. "OHHHHHHHHH! PAPA! Regarde donc!" Bouncing giddily, Habren Bryland squeals girlishly and points at the golem. "A real golem! I want it!"

"Shale's not for sale," Rori sighs.

"It belongs to you?!" Habren Bryland is outraged. "Papa! Why does Rori Cousland have a golem and I have none? I WANT A GOLEM! NOW!"

"Why is it so noisy? Does that insipid soft flesh-creature want to arm-wrestle me as well?" Shale booms. "If not, can I crush its head?"

"Unfortunately no," Rori sighs.

"I could rip out its arms instead?"

"Habren, mon coeur, maybe another puppy is a better choice," Bryland squeaks.

Leonas Bryland has my deepest sympathy. I buy him a drink. He looks as if he needed one. It's Leliana to solve the problem for us, engaging Habren in a conversation about footwear and Orlesian fashion. And we finally can talk about politics!

Huh? No, I'm not drunk. A little tipsy, that's it. After Habren Bryland politics sound like a vacation. At least as long as it's talking to Arl Bryland and Bann Alfstanna. Ceorlic, well, that's a different story.

He completely ignores me when Rori joins him and Arl Wulff to introduce me.

"You're being very foolish. Why would Loghain leave half our own army to die when a Blight threatens? I take him at his word: The battle could not be won." Ceorlic barks at Rori when she tries to open his eyes about the Hero of the River Dane. "I would rather see Anora keep the throne, myself. Better it passes to the Mac Tir line than to some by-blow."
"The by-blow is right here, you know," I mutter. "And there's nothing wrong with my hearing. I just wish people would stop acting as if I wasn't there. It's quite annoying."

"You want attention? What have you done to deserve it, boy?" Ceorlic spits at me.

"I have assembled an army. that's more than Loghain has managed," I retort before I can even think about it. Whoa! What do they mix with their plum wine? Liquid boldness? "Err... with Rori's help. And that of..."

"And nothing you will ever get done without help," Ceorlic snorts.

"Your lands are right next to Loghain's, right?" Rori asks sweetly. "If I was in your situation and didn't have no balls, I'd also side with Loghain. Boy! I'd probably wet my pants only thinking about what Loghain would do to me if I objected."

"You don't have balls, kitten," I grin.

"Well, good my lands aren't next to Loghain's, right?"

We leave a fuming Ceorlic alone and join our companions. Wynne, Zevran, Leliana, Oghren and a freshly repaired James are engaged in a game of Wicked Grace. James is naked again - much to Zevran's delight. Oghren wears nothing but his smallclothes. Wynne... MAKER! I don't want to stare but I can't help it... She wears bright red knitted smallclothes. Small like real small. Rori would look very sexy in those... but Wynne... Would you want to see your granny in sexy underwear? Would you even want to imagine?

"One more game and I finally get to see that magical bosom, my darling Wynne," Zevran chortles. Seems the clerk found the three-holes-smallclothes in S. Maker's Breath! My nightmares have just gained another aspect of immense mind-shattering horror.

"Maker! Zev! You didn't really buy that thing!" Rori squeaks, ogling the elf wide-eyed. I quickly cover Rori's eyes with my hands.

"I'm out," Wynne smartly decides. Instead she empties the rest of the decanter and orders more plum wine.

"Oh, come on! One more game! Only one! Did I mention my mother died when I was a baby..."

"Dude, I do need a drink now," Rori mutters. "And Zev needs some pants. And Wynne needs a dress and Oghren needs to change his smallclothes more often than once a month."

"You had enough drinks," the totally sober Qunari lectures her. He sits there with Shale and they are both so motionless, I poke Sten to see if he has turned into stone and next there's a stench that makes me choke.

"Do you smell that?" Rori asks, sniffing the air. "Maker! What is that stench?"

"I swear I didn't take off my boots!"

"That's no smelly socks, it's..." She inches away from Sten.

"C'mon. Who ate the cabbage?" Oghren presses himself in between Rori and the Qunari and nudges Sten's side with his elbow as if they were best buddies.

"Why ask me?" the Qunari asks indignantly.
"I guess you thought we could all share in the bounty?" Oghren grunts, utterly amused. He even inhales deeply, fanning the foul air towards his flared nostrils.

Sten sighs exasperatedly.

"Stand up to it, you giant ass!" Oghren roars for everybody and their dog to hear. "You've birthed a cloud to be proud of!"

"Humph." Sten doesn't look proud. He doesn't have much of a facial expression but I dare say that is a blush. A very bright one.

"I hope you've thought of a name," Oghren shortles. "Whew."

Sten is saved... or maybe it's Oghren being saved according to that look on the Qunari's face... by the return of Angus Mac Eanraig, rolling a barrel in front of him.

"Oh, is this a South Reach Blossom 9:07 Dragon?" Wynne exclaims at the sight of the brand on the barrel. Her voice is quite slurry already.

"Very much so," Bann Mac Eanraig confirms. "Would the lady have a drink with me." The lady would. She takes his outstretched hand and - still only in her knitted underwear - rises from her seat, giggling like a young girl when Mac Eanraig goes on: "A wonderful wine and the company of a beautiful woman. What more can a man wish for?"

Zevran sulkingly watches them leave. "What does he have that I don't have?" he wonders out loud. "He's twice my age, fat with a peg-leg and one eye missing... It has to be his titles."

"Or the fact that he invites her to a drink before he asks about fondling her bosom," I observe.

"Alistair, me dear friend, I've never thought this day would come, but you could indeed be right!" Zevran muses after downing another glass of that awful plum wine.

Shortly after Wynne has left with Angus Mac Eanraig, the rest of the by now very drunken nobles returns from the wine cellar and marches towards my table, roaring at the top of their voices:

"For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fe-ellooooooooow - and nobody can deny!"

Before I can as much as protest or run for the hills, they lift me onto their shoulders and parade with me through the tavern.

"Help!" I mouth at Rori but she just waves, giving me thumbs up.

"They love you!" she shouts

And that's when they drop me.

"Ouch!"

"Hey! Don't kill him! He's the last Theirin!" Rori shouts after them when they pull me off the ground and lift me over their heads again. Some even think throwing me into the air might be a bright idea. The ceiling in this tavern is rather low, just in case I haven't mentioned yet. Unfortunately nobody cares or they don't notice, they are drunk as a lord. Many lords. A whole gang of them.

"OW! ROOOOOOOOOOOR!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"
It's not her saving me, but Angus Mac Eanraig, equally drunk. His arm slung around Wynne's waist, he climbs onto the bar. Wynne grins siliily and waves, blowing kisses at the crowd when Angus Mac Eanraig declares his engagement to this lovely lady in knitted underwear. And then he kisses her, tongue and everything.

Ew!

EWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!

She is old!

He is old!

The nobility is so busy cheering and applauding they all totally forget they just hauled me into the air again - so I slam onto the ground unbraked.

Maker! My back!

Angus buys everybody a drink. Rori and I are invited to sit with the happy couple and Angus toasts on Rori's parents until her eyes roll back in their sockets and she vanishes under the table.

I'd love to join her, but Angus and his buddies keep slapping my back, remarking on how much I look like Maric. Very drunk women of all ages slump against me and their hands are in places solely reserved to Rori. Maker's Breath! And she's not even there to save her. I nudge her with my boot but she's unable to do anything next to groaning. Then she becomes sick onto some very fashionable ladies' footwear and the groping squad disappears as quickly as they have come over me.

Still everybody wants to propose a toast to Maric, Cailan, Maric again and so forth. Arm in arm with my new best buddies, I sing *The Soldier and the Seawolf* until I am hoarse.

That's when Wynne has to ask Angus about the sea battle of Denerim and instead of just telling her, he insists we all show her.

"Alistair! You are Maric!" Angus drones and someone slaps a bread basket on my head as a makeshift crown and one of the curtains makes for an ermine coat. I get a loaf of Orlesian bread for a scepter and am relieved to hear that Maric and his soldiers await the Orlesian bastards at the harbour - where they never arrived. So I get to stand behind the bar while poor Rori has to play her mother and several young men get into a fight about who is to play her dad. In the end it's Zevran and first thing, Rori shoves him off her table ship into the sea.

I swear Shale grins as wide as a golem can grin when she shoves the tables around, mostly shoving them so hard, they crash against the wall or other ships and within no time at all, half of the Orlesian and Fereldan fleet is in distress at sea.

The leading Orlesian ship rams the bar and King Maric is forced to defend himself and his capital. Arl Bryland swings his leeks against me and I beat him with my loaf of bread.

Meanwhile Rori with a battlecry jumps from her table to Leliana's and smacks the bard with her celery blades. The sister has long ago lost her weapon and flees, jumping from table to table. She captures James Mac Eanraig's table only to have it shoved against the next wall by an overly enthusiastic Shale.

Merciful Andraste! Ain't I thankful, when Rori jumps over the bar and we do the Orlesian leave, crawling down the corridor on all fours towards the private rooms. I have the loveliest view with Rori right in front of me.
We collapse on the rug, a very dead bear, I on top of Rori and she all wrapped around me. Her lips taste of plum wine and I decide it's not as awful as I thought. Miscellaneous with Rori's own flavour of sage and peppermint and the velvety sweetness of her tongue stroking mine, plum wine becomes my favourite rapidly.

She mewls my name when I slide my lips down her neck to the hollow of her throat. Tearing at her blouse I reveal some really fine Orlesian lingerie. The wrapping pales in comparison to the content. The pearly paleness of her flawless skin feels smooth against my lips. Sucking the rosy peaks of her heaving bosom into my mouth, I make her cry in aching lust. She squirms beneath me, whining at my touch, so intense against her sensitive breasts.

I grind my hips against hers, making her feel her effect on me. My hands hastily pull at the waistband and breeches of her pants. At the same time I try to kick off my trousers, shifting and cursing under my breath as I fight with the garments. Flaps and holes certainly don't sound like such a bad idea anymore. Tossing aside boots and pants, I massage her buttocks, pulling her heated core against me, feeling her slickness rubbing against my manhood.

Rori's fingers entangle with my hair, one hand sneaking down my back and beneath my shirt. Her fingernails rake across my skin, digging into muscular flesh...

Maker's Breath!

"Alistair..." Rori sighs, wiggling in my embrace to stop me from mounting her.

"D'awwww..." I complain and she smacks the back of my head teasingly.

"One moment... I have to... be right back..."

Reluctantly I let go of her, watching how she fishes the chamberpot from under the bed and vanishes behind the screen at the other side of the room.

Lying prone, proped on my elbows, I'm so lost in my dreamy imagination of my immediate future that I don't notice how I doze off.

I wake to Zevran nudging my ribs with his foot. His face swims into view, everything is kinda blurry and I feel so dizzy my head is spinning.

There's this strange drawings on his face. The ones Leliana and Rori think are sexy. Not cute. Hot.

"I've been - hicks - thinking about those ink drawings, what did you call them? Tattoos?" I slur, poking the elf in the face. "Are you... -hicks - willing to do one?

"Oh-ho! You've decided to take the plunge, have you? What is a little pain, am I right? You are drunk enough, doubt you'd feel much anything. By the way, is there a reason why you are lying naked on a bearskin?"

"Dunno." I ogle the bear suspiciously. I also ogle my naked hindquarters. Where did my pants go?

"Where is Rori?"

"Dunno," I grunt, weakly pulling at the blanket on the bed to cover my nakedness. "I'm not worried about - hicks - that... the pain...," I go on while Zevran searches the room. "I think they look interesting, though I'd want mine...-hicks- smaller."

"She has passed out on the chamberpot," Zevran chuckles. "You're both drunk as a skunk, aren't
"When can you do it?" I have no clue what Zevran is talking about. All I am able to concentrate on is those cool drawings. I want one. Something manly. Something...

"Not so fast, my friend," Zevran interrupts from behind the screen. When he reappears he cradles Rori in his arms. She doesn't wear any pants, her blouse isn't covering anything that requires cover and she is fast asleep. "There is an entire ritual to how this is done, do you not know?" Zevran goes on as he tugs Rori into bed. "First I need to bathe you in a mixture of olives and rosewater."

"You need to... -hicks- bathe me? That seems... -hicks- odd." Maker! I am feeling so awfully sick.

"No, no, no, not at all," Zevran grins.

"Since -hicks- when do you have a second head?" I wonder. "Is -hicks- this a trick?"

The elf sighs and shakes his two heads. I wish he wouldn't move so quickly. "It needs to be worked into your skin, preparing it to receive the ink. The massage is quite pleasurable, do not worry. You are in good hands."

"The... -hicks- massage? You're... having me on, aren't you?" hiccup, regarding the blurry two-headed elf suspiciously.

"I might be. I might not be." The elf laughs. "Maybe you should wait until you are sober..."

"Nah -hicks- want it now..."

"Where would you want your tattoo?" Zevran asks curiously, rolling up his sleeves.

Oh, I haven't thought about that. Frown and seriously contemplate. Zevran nudges me again when my head falls to the rug and I begin to snore. "On my ar-hicks-s." I blurt out. Arms, yes, good place. Something manly on my manly biceps.

"Your arse?" Zevran wonders out loud. "Bold choice, my dear friend."

What!? "No, no, my ar-hicks-s."

Last thing I hear before I pass out, is the elf chirping merrily: "I hear you, my friend. Don't you worry, Zevran will take it in his skilled hands. The result will be most satisfying."

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