Past the Shades where Blind Men Grope

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Summary

Where the Hero of Ferelden tries to stop the Calling and ends up stumbling out of the Fade and joining the Inquisition --- a story of the Commander of the Grey as the Herald of Andraste. Because sometimes the familiar faces around you are just as they are portrayed and sometimes, they mean much, much more.

“I knew an Amell once. She was a special women. Never met her like again.”
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Those who oppose thee
Shall know the WRATH OF HEAVEN.
Field and forest shall burn,
The seas shall rise and devour them,
The wind shall tear their nations
From the face of the earth,
Lightning shall rain down from the sky,
They shall cry out to their false gods,
And find silence.

-Andraste 7:19

Amell

The sound of her mabari's paw scraping at the iron deposit at the mountain side jolted her out of her reverie - Amell slowed her descent, stood still, and took a deep breath. Carrion... Darkspawn... Some ten meters to her right beyond the tree line. It was as if Janeka had left behind a trail of breadcrumbs - good mage, foulest woman. Amell tugged at the fraying thread of her cowl and reached behind for her staff, the spell for a fireball already on the tip of her tongue. It was over before her mabari could overwhelm the group. Instead, Dog (unfortunate name: by the time she had a better one to offer, Ser Barks-a-lot, thank you Anders, he was already accustomed and reluctant to change) returned at her heel with some herbs in his mouth.

"Elfroot doesn't stop the voices," she admonished while tugging at his lone ear, "I thought I told you that already. Thank you anyways, boy." Sighing, she straightened and brushed off dirt from the pants of her mercenary armor that she pilfered off a dead corpse: such was the lifestyle of a person living outside of the towns. "Stupid Janeka. Stupid Callings." A raven flew overhead as she again adjusted her hood, "the only thing worse than walking into a trap is knowingly walking into a trap without the knowledge of the nature of trap or or how to disable it. Is it brave, crazy, or stupid?" Then she smacked her cheeks twice, hard enough to sting. "Ugh. Stop talking to yourself, Amell." As if fleeing from her self-manifested insanity, the Warden Commander started a fast pace, feet eating the ground as she swiftly crossed the valley, Dog loping happily behind her.

As she rounded the bend, the small settlement of Haven slowly emerges from the Frostback Mountains like a mirage in the distance. Humble homes of pious men and women offered hints of a merry hearth through their windows - a marked difference from when she had last ventured here. All the reavers that had she killed so long ago must be turning in their graves. "The Temple was built into the mountain, a bit higher in altitude, if I recall correctly..." Dog barked an assent. "Right, right," Rubbing her hands together, she mumbled, "Let's hope that they allow inconspicuous visitors to peruse their libraries."

Divine Justinia's entourage that arrived days prior at Haven included countless scholars, many Brother Genitivis, and tomes that hold a more unbiased, historical viewpoint of the origins of Darkspawn (Orlais has always held knowledge for the sake of knowledge at a higher value than
Ferelden, being more "civilized" and all). Perhaps there in the Temple of the Sacred Ashes, she could find a solution to the Calling madness. The problem was that she couldn't figure out whether the plan to infiltrate the Temple was her own or was encouraged by the Calling- and if it was the latter, then why to Haven and not to the Deep Roads?

Nervously, Amell fingered the locket resting between her collarbones, blood-red and warm to the touch. Flemeth had offered it hanging off one extended arm, reflecting light from a sun hidden behind the clouds, "It may not seem like it, child, but I am pleasantly surprised to find that you are still alive," the apostate had remarked with the usual glint in her eyes, one that Amell always failed to interpret, "was it Morrigan who found the ritual? She always did like to defy fate, which is why she broke the mold. It's the first step to godhood," and then she threw her head back and laughed at her private joke.

Amell had exchanged a not-so-discreet look with Dog and raised an eyebrow, "You want me alive like you want Morrigan alive," she had muttered, mind trying to connect lore and logic, "though I don't understand what this is supposed to do." She held up the locket, running a finger over the gem encased, jerking back as it trembles with power, "I won't have long to enjoy it. I don't know if you're aware but the Calling frequency is rising among the Ferelden wardens. We are all dying."

"Not so much dying as being picked off," Flemeth had dryly remarked.

"I've watched my people march toward their meaningless deaths. I am well aware," frustrated, she ran a hand through her hair, barely held together by pieces of string and ribbon- a rather apt metaphor for her life, "I'm looking for the one responsible but she's disappeared. And its not like I'm effective in this state of mind, waking up in places I don't remember walking to; my feet turning northward if I do not focus." Stupid Janeka. "But," the Warden Commander had mused, "you know that. You..." She turned toward the elder and eyed her critically, at her armor and bone-white hair, the wrinkles and the hard eyes, "you are something else beyond a batty, old woman that lives in the Kocari Wilds. I don't even know why you let me kill you, sort of, not really."

The elder woman had laughed. "Smart child, I did like that about you. This gift will help you solve your problems. Accept the boon and be grateful, for it is rare that I favor mortals, especially ones who tried to kill me. Or is it that my favor grew because you killed a part of me..." The witch had pursed her lips, "the latter," she decided as she touched the red gem with a finger, "wear this and you will not forget. It will give you... A fighting chance to save those under you. But beware, this is fragile and we do not share our fragile things. Do you understand?" Amell had wordlessly nodded, "Good. Then I am done here. The Hinterlands do not appeal to me in the slightest." Flemeth took five steps back and closed her eyes. The young mage did not blink as she watched the power swirl around the Witch of the Wilds, morphing her features into that of a familiar dragon.

"She works in mysterious ways, doesn't she? Just like the Maker." Amell had turned on her heels as soon as the dragon disappeared over the horizon and squinted at the trail marker sitting a few meters away. As she slowly increased her pace to a steady jog, she adorned the gift and shivered as the metal hit her skin. She didn't feel better; there was no miraculous cleansing of her mind and she could still feel the Calling pulling at the back of her head. The Taint was still there. Well, Flemeth had said that she could stop the sleepwalking, not the Blight.

The sheer presence of the Temple of Sacred Ashes forced a chill down her back... Or maybe there was some foreboding air about the structure, contrary to it's divine origin. She listened to the Chant echoing deeper in the mountain. After sending Dog away to gather more elfroot (the Temple did not allow mabaris, ironic considering that Dog was one of the original four of her party to traverse the area), tugging once again at her hood and making sure that her pack and her staff were securely strapped, she ventured through the doorway and... and...
Leliana

Vengeance sang in her blood like an old lover - it sang Marjolaine's song, once used to enchant the Orlesian nobles in the Empress's Court. The hunger for the death of her enemies was a feeling that she is used to but never had it struck with such speed or force as when she witnessed the formation of the large rift in the sky, high above the Frostback Mountains, the demons ravaging the once-peaceful lands, and the fires crackling around the destroyed Conclave. Cassandra stood in front of her own armed men before the ruins, face unmoving as if made of cold iron. Leliana's hands begun shaking as she listened to the warrior's report: she had known something was wrong, but this... The destruction pales in comparison to what she expected to find, to what she had hoped for. As her eyes inspected the utter havoc and as she began to calculate the costs of the fallout and the potential paths to take following the explosion, she listened, "...in the Temple that ripped the... releasing shades... One survived... require your skillset... She is beginning to stir."

"Take me to her," her tone promised retribution that few would imagine. She was led to a cell at the end of a long hallway in a structure that muffled the screams originating from the outside world. The two did not talk.

The prisoner was kneeling on the stone floor, wrists shackled by a wooden board, a sickly green sigil on her left palm, head bent forward, face covered by an over-sized cowl. Cassandra opened the barred doors, causing its inhabitant to startle, an aborted jerk but nothing more. The Seeker strolled forward, a hand gripped the edge of the hood, and abruptly yanked it back, revealing startled gray eyes, blinking rapidly at the sudden increase in light. Leliana drew a sharp intake of breath: the face tired but still youthful, the dark hair held back by strings and ribbons, the lips that could curl into an easy smile, they were all features she knew keenly, "Amell?!"

The mage warden stilled for a second before hesitantly calling out, "Leliana?" (Her name was the only Orlesian word that the warden could say without butchering the pronunciation.) Still blinded, Amell turned her head in the direction of the bard's voice, "Is that you?" She winced as the sigil flared up, "What happened? Why am I here?"

Cassandra stalked around the small encasement, hands twitching, itching to strike a blow toward the prisoner, "It appears that you know Sister Leliana. I am Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast. We are the Right and Left Hand of Divine Justinia V. Her Most Holy perished with all the members of the peace conference who wished for ceasefire and all the clerics of the Chantry and the pilgrims who hoped for salvation in the war - the Conclave is gone." After a few moments of silence, broken by the footsteps of boots on the stone floor, she continued, "Fade rifts are opening in the skies above us, allowing demons to spill out into our world. My men spotted you falling out of the Breach, the original tear in the Veil. You are the only survivor."

"So many dead... You think I'm the one responsible," Amell whispered with a faint tone of incredulity, "I would not!" She turned to the other woman standing in the shadows and pleaded, "Leliana! You know I wouldn't!" And that's the crux of it, wasn't it? The Amell she knew would not condone such an action - the Hero of Ferelden would never wish for such bloodshed. This woman was not the enemy; she is a long lost friend. And yet, there are no other prisoners, no other suspects... Unless...

Leliana shook her head and kneaded the skin between her eyes, "I'll vouch for her character." Cassandra visibly cooled but remained restless, looking for someone to implicate - her rage was that of her blade, one that can be honed and sharpened. The ground trembled, dust fell from the walls as they shuddered on questionable foundations. "There are many things to discuss," many which...
included the fact that the Divine's agents had been searching for the Warden Commander for years just to have her fall into their laps at the worst of times, "but we have more immediate issues to address. Cassandra, release her so we can leave before the ceiling falls on us. Amell, tell me what happened."

The warden swayed onto her feet and half-collapsed onto Cassandra's shoulder as the locks clicked open. As she limped down the arched chamber, her head began to spin and it felt as if the exit was moving slowly away from her, ever out of her grasp. She gingerly rubbed her raw wrists, frowning in thought as she slowly recounted her version of the events, "I was in the Fade, the paths were overwhelmed by spider-like creatures. I followed the figure of a woman, silhouetted by light... She reached out to me..."

"A woman...," Leliana murmured, exchanging looks with the Seeker, "Before that?" she further pressed as she scrutinized Amell's mien: glazed, unfocused, exhausted...

"I... don't remember," the mage admitted, wiping her face with her sleeve as she stumbled her way to the doorway and into the open air, "I was here initially to..." Her mouth dropped open, eyes widening in shock as she stared at the pulsing green hovering to the left of the mountains, "Is that a rift? Andraste's flaming-" And then she hissed, doubling over as the mark angrily crackled, green light shining past her clenched fists. Leliana pried open her fingers and made a displeased sound.

The Seeker's scowl grew darker, "There are many out there and it seems as though your little gift from the Fade might be connected to them."

"If you can take this gift off of me, I'll never curse again," the mage groaned, turning her head as to not accidentally swallow grass, trying to wave away Leliana's reawakened habit of fussing over her.

"It grows as the Breach grows: that implies a shared power," Cassandra continued as though Amell had not interrupted, drawing her sword and shield, "We can test this against the original. If my hypothesis is correct and that mark gave you the power to close the tears, then you are the only one who can save us."

From her place on the ground, Amell started laughing with a touch a hysteria.

**Cassandra**

Seeker Pentaghast had always known that her pledge to the Divine locked her into a future of dedicating her templar talents to serving the righteous. She had foreseen a future of battling all sorts of entities and overcoming all sorts of challenges: Chantry politics, darkspawn, corrupted wildlife, both sides of the inevitable mage-templar war, and the degenerates of humankind: but never would she had predicted that the sky will tear and scatter demons and spirits across all of Ferelden. It was as if all of Fate's worst possible choices had crashed down upon her: the death of all of those in the Conclave is one such tragedy that would take years if not a lifetime for her to forgive herself. Logically, she knew that she was not responsible for stopping a tragedy of this scale but...

So one could only look ahead - past the mass exodus to the north camp in Haven and past the initial success of stopping the Breach from growing. Many villagers were beginning see the Herald of Andraste as a means of salvation, the comatose mage that is currently being frantically treated by an alchemist turned reluctant healer, Amell, "Commander of the Grey, Ruler of Vigil's Keep, Arlessa of Amaranthine, and Hero of Ferelden," Leliana had informed Cassandra the day before she left camp to gather her scouts to the eastern parts of the Hinterlands, promising to return before the patient
wakes. "Collector of unique friends," the Sister had added with a hint of smile on her lips, referring to the fact that neither Varric nor the elven apostate, Solas, had decided to join the groups that were trying to make their way to Orlais to escape the chaos and were at the camp waiting for her slow recovery to finish. "Her charm has not dwindled in the years that we've been apart. The dwarf had remarked that it was probably a family trait."

"So after scouring the entirety of Thedas, the Hero of Ferelden shows up on our doorstep with death, fire, and Fade chasing her," muttered the Seeker, resisting the temptation to rub her temples. Clearing her throat, Cassandra recalled, "Yes, Varric's story did detail the history of Hawke's immediate and extended family. I thought it was related to his characteristic habit embellishment. So it's true, the Champion of Kirkwall is related to the Hero of Ferelden?"

"Second cousins to be exact," Leliana affirmed, "though I think only Hawke is aware of the relation." The Spymaster bends down to brush off dirt from the tops of her boots, "The Maker has a sense of humor, does he not? These days, I do not know whether to smile, cry, or scream." she paused as she adjusted her hidden daggers, "I would strongly recommend you to debrief Commander Cullen before you assemble the War Council. And when you do tell him of the news, please break it to him gently."

Cassandra raised her eyes heavenward. She had once heard a wise woman remark that the strings that hold people of destiny, the people who have that will inside of them to make significant changes in history, were all connected - but she did not realize how nearly literal that statement would come to be. These series of seemingly naturally foreordained events were beginning to wear on her, "Is he also familiar with the Herald?"

"Somewhat," the bard spoke slowly, as if delicately choosing the words to accurately frame the overall atmosphere that Cassandra can expect when she would next meet the Commander. "I don't know much of Amell's past before I met her; she offered very little. He was acquainted with her before she joined the wardens, when she was still an apprentice. I was there when we saved Kinloch Hold from a blood mage rebellion and he was one of the few templars we managed to rescue. It was not a pleasant reunion."

And because these days the Maker does seem to have a sense of humor, Cassandra was not surprised that when she walked towards Commander Cullen's desk later that day, that she would spy the dwarf sitting on a high-backed chair making conversation, seamlessly transitioning from one topic to another. The Seeker did her best to ignore Varric and the small smirk on his lips when he noticed how she momentarily twitched upon seeing him. "Looks like Seeker is here," he cheerfully announced, smoothly closing a worn, leather bound notebook and tucking it into an inner pocket, "you might want to look up from your papers before she decides to use that shield of hers to make you listen." At those words, the Commander glanced up and stood to welcome her in. After taking a moment to decide whether or not to kick the dwarf out of the room for some semblance of privacy (and in the end, she did not, believing that for all of his faults, Varric Tethras does know which words to use to unravel tension in a conversation), Cassandra spoke.

Although Leliana is usually correct in her judgments of people, she surprisingly downgraded the importance of this one instance. Saying that Cullen Rutherford knows of the Hero of Ferelden is like saying Leliana knows of the Divine. His reaction, the inkwell shattering in his hand, did not in any way show that his and Amell's relationship could be described with the word "acquainted." In a rare moment of synchronicity, Cassandra and Varric stared at the shattered glass on the floor, the black liquid dripping down between clenched fingers, at each other, and then back at the Commander, each with a raised eyebrow. "Do you need a private moment, Curly?" Varric asked as Cullen did not speak and instead stared at his stained glove as if it held to answers to all the questions in the world.
"I... No... I'm fine." The man forced himself out of his dazed reverie. Many emotions danced on his face unguarded: conflict, hope, anticipation, others flitted by so fast they were unreadable. He drew in a deep breath as he separated his stained papers into two piles: the salvageable and the unreadable, turned toward Cassandra, and struggled to regain his authoritative air. "The Herald... Hero... Amell... Amell. I read your report where you stated that she was unconscious when she arrived due to the battle with the Pride Demon and suspending the growth of the Breach but - I mean, can I..." He trailed off, the tips of his ears turning into a shade of red that was visible even as he ducked his head.

"Our chemist is trying to heal her, but it seems like the elven apostate, Solas, is doing most of the tending. He explicitly stated that he was not to be disturbed until she can walk." Thank goodness he said so - for his word and self-proclaimed expertise of the Fade is one of the main factors preventing the locals of Haven from treating the Herald's small cabin as a secondary Chantry. "His vigilance at her bedside is admirable," she stiffly admitted.

"Chuckles mentioned something about making sure that the Mark doesn't kill her as she heals," Varric helpfully added, knuckles rapping against the wood of the desk. "He's lucky her mabari allows him cast all those spells on her; that animal is terrifying, even with the missing ear." Her dog is the other factor preventing a mob from forming at her doorstep.

Cullen kept shuffling his papers, "In that case, can I inquire how she is faring?"

Brow furrowed in mild confusion, Cassandra dutifully answered, "Adam reported that she is expected to make a full recovery though he was adamant to emphasize the fact that she almost died multiple times and that he is not a trained healer."

"I mean when you first me her; how was she?" Sudden, the unspoken inquires in his sentences made more sense. Was she happy? Upset? How is she a person? Do you like her like I do? Frustration laced his tone as a red blush spread from the tips of his ears to his neck. He kept his eyes pinned on the opposite wall, careful to avoid both of the other occupants' curious gazes. The walls and floors were of stone, decorated by tapestries and fur rugs stripped from the warm bodies of bears and wolves. "It's- it's not what you think," he quickly backtracked, holding up both hands, palms forward.

Varric gave a low whistle, reaching in his leather duster for his notebook, looking as though he had won a lottery. After a moment of deliberation, Cassandra suddenly understood, "Ahh," she sighed as she crossed her arms.

"It's not what you think," he repeated, "We were only friends in Ferelden." It was a known fact to his circle of close friends that the Commander is not capable of winning Wicked Grace because of his tells: one most notable is when he rubs the back of his neck, signifying utter embarrassment. It is even more rare that he indulges in this gesture in a professional setting.

"Not with that attitude," Varric admonished, also crossing his own arms, "You're a horrible liar, by the way. Tell me, you said you knew of an Amell when Hawke and I first met you in the Gallows - that's her, I take it?" But Cullen, with finally enough time to recover from his blunder, clamped down, and refused to reveal anymore. Not that it could deter Varric; the dwarf tsked at the Commander, slowly shaking his head, "So those rumors... I thought so." Cullen slowly lowered himself back to his chair and covered his burning face in his hands, both the stained and the unstained. The Seeker closed her eyes in thought; what she knew of Cullen's past were from conversations with the man (regarding his battle with lyrium addiction), Leliana (the few words that he had exchanged with the Warden Commander at Kinloch Hold), and the story that she had wrangled out of Varric during his interrogation (the mess at Kirkwall). But this? This continuation of Leliana's intelligent thread was becoming too personal for her to feel comfortable to finish. The
dwarf obviously had the same thought, for after two beats of silence he sighed and offered, "She looked tired."

Cassandra glared at the dwarf, who immediately dropped into a defensive stance, "Something more positive, Varric," she icily rebuked before turning towards the man behind the desk, "She is a noble woman, Cullen," a description that embodied the Seeker's opinion of what is the most highest praise. "Though I did not stay with her long, I can already identify the qualities that you admire in her."

Standing beside her, Varric failed to hide his burst of laughter, "Yes, noble. Let's just say that Hawke would love her." He raised a shoulder in a half-shrugging motion, "She reads Hard in Hightown; so she's automatically off of my immediate kill list." Cassandra suspects that it would only be a matter of days before he comes up with a suitable nickname for the Herald; she hopes that the dwarf would at least wait until she is awake.

"Thank you, both," Cullen groaned, voice muffled in his hands, "for your valuable input. An embodiment of contradictions; yes, that sounds like her." He heaved a deep sigh, straightening his back, his expression, hovering between torn and fond, disappeared. Varric chuckled; he had spent half of the day with the Commander regaling tales of his brief adventure with her - though he had not mentioned the name, such is the nature of Varric Tethras, with his one exception being Hawke. He did not expect the day to shape up in this manner. The light that shined through the windows was nearly parallel with the floor - night arrived with the dim noise of the men returning to camp with firewood. So ended day two of the Herald's... Amell's recovery. "Did she read any other of your books, dwarf? The ones where you narrated the life of the Champion of Kirkwall? Does she know what I did there?" What horrors he had both prevented and allowed past his watchful gaze, stationed at the Gallows. How he had served under a Commander who was willing to used tainted power to further her own plans.

"I don't think so; she didn't say," Lingering by the doorway, Varric mused, rubbing his chin, then hurriedly attempting to soothe the distraught man, "You weren't too terrible in Kirkwall, Curly. You fought alongside us in the end against an army of statues in the Gallows and Meredith when she began glowing - not many people can do that." After a few more minutes of Varric's awkward attempts at comfort which included, "Just direct her to me if she's scared - I'll make her believe that you kiss puppies every morning," the dwarf gave up and, after shooting Cassandra an unreadable look, announced his leave, and was gone, humming a small tune under his breath.

Cassandra patiently waited for the doors to close before audibly clearing her throat, "Commander." The man's eyes snapped up to meet hers; she assumed a ready stance, "It has already been decided that you will be one of her advisors. When we inform her of her place in the Inquisition, will I expect any problems between you two?" Because though she doubted that Cullen had an actual tryst with the Herald (they possibly had something close to that, but never the real thing), as what Varric was snidely implying, she did acknowledge some deep set, dark history between them, likely revolving around the infamous mage, Uldred, and the bloodshed at the Ferelden Circle.

To her surprise, Cullen laughed, low in his chest, emanating with a hint of bitterness, "From Varric's tales, you won't need to worry about any fuss from her end - it seems that she hasn't changed at all, even after all these years. I, on the other hand," he stares into a potential far distant future with a wistful expression on his face, "Regardless of what she thinks of me, I will be happy to see her again."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

THE THREAT REMAINS

Amell

She approached the Black City that stood proudly at the end of a winding boulevard lined with burning pillars and impressions of dead trees. Great yet terrible, the Black City embodied the source of the misfortunes that Thedas continuously faced: it was sin, the consequences of man's pride, the birth of darkspawn taint; it was where the seven Tevinter magisters sought to view the throne of the Maker; it was where the Maker allowed his creations to fall. She walked slowly, taking in her surroundings with a hint of reverence and craning her neck upwards towards the green skies. The City was tantalizingly close; the City was a Calling. It was a chore to merely breath the air, heavy with promises of power and whispers of sacrifices that were required if one wished to become a god. Her steps echoed; hard soles tapped against the pavement. The vibrations echoed in sync with the distant humming that was all prevalent in the Fade. Various creatures shuffled restlessly just out of her periphery, observing, waiting patiently for her to... She froze.

Yes, Amell froze. She stood in the middle of the road, her mind reeling from the shock of what was happening.

"For her to what?"

Green light arced outwards from her left palm, cracking loudly as they struck the path ahead and rendering the cobblestones to obsidian; she hissed and curled inward as the pain traveled up her arm, branching out at her shoulder. Her mind fell out of the hazy dream-like quality of the Fade realm like ice down her back; she shuddered. Preternatural claws that were gently caressing her thoughts suddenly disappeared - their siren song turned into an angry silence of an animal that realized that their prey had escaped their grasp. Amell took two steps back and fell into a battle-ready stance, magic dancing restlessly under her skin. Her heart was beating an uneasy rhythm; the pulsing adrenaline rush forced a heady roar into her ears. The mind was clear now; she was aware. She frowned as her instincts began to take not as to what was wrong.

The strange conglomeration of towers, shrouded by a green haze, were closer than she could recall from her Harrowing or her pursuit of the Sloth Demon when she sought to save the Ferelden Circle - but, that can't be right: doesn't the Black City lie on an event horizon? Shouldn't it be unreachable? Shouldn't it be unattainable?

A lone howl of sorrow and anger pierced the veil-like nature of the surreal dimension. As the Fade creatures began to flank her, the feral sound pulled her away from the road. The world cracked in half.

Amell awoke: a slight hitch in her breath, a slight twitch in her fingers where her weapon should be... Nothing. Her entire body ached with the power of a thousand bruises; her head throbbed with similar vengeance. But she could sit up and... She grabbed her head as a sharp pressure struck her temples, muttering expletives under her breath. The Calling was stronger in her weakened state - taking the form of gentle whispers that encouraged her to join her fellow wardens at the Ferelden-Orlais border. With every word, the voices created spikes of pain on the skin where the green runic mark laid etched - a fact that did not make her happy, for it seems that her problems are intertwined with the
Chantry's crisis and isn't that something to look forward to? A connection between the wardens' plight and the sundered skies is something a prophet would predict only when the world was ending. *The world is ending, again.*

Her hands skimmed across her abdomen; hands skimmed over high quality fabric - is this noble clothing? At least she didn't get broken ribs, unlike the last time she had fought off a Pride Demon. She grimaced: right, first order of business is to find...

The rhythmic thumps of a stubby tail knocking against a table shook her out of her reverie: Dog waited patiently by the far wall, next to a table that held a plate overflowing with fruits, Flemeth's fire opal amulet in his mouth.

Good dog.

The door opened. A elven servant, barely on the cusp of adulthood, startled at her wakened state, so startled that she couldn't coherently answer any of her questions. But her visit cleared up two things. One: Cassandra was waiting for her at the doors of the Haven Chantry to escort her to the Inner Sanctum to discuss various things (further pressing for details leaves the servant in confused tears). Two: Sometime during her comatose state, she was awarded with the title: Herald of Andraste - three words important enough to invite the most formal bows usually reserved for the most divine mortals in Thedas where palms, knees, and forehead all touch the ground. (She falls as a scrape goat; she wakes up a savior.)

Andraste... Because that was who the witnesses thought who the woman in the Fade was - and yet the witnesses fail to mention who the voice of the man was: the one who is most likely responsible for this disaster. At least she could be sure that it wasn't Janeka - or wasn't her anymore in some sense of the word. Did that mean that she was killed by her own prisoner? Was the darkspawn that the wardens held prisoner an Archdemon? That would explain Janeka's change in behavior but not much else. Amell sighed, wringing her hands together as Dog curled around her left leg, whining softly. Nothing fruitful came from her investigations and her sources were dead. It was back to the drawing board which consisted of... She chewed on her bottom lip in thought as she momentarily weighed the pros and cons between fleeing the village and returning to Soldier's Peak and following Seeker Cassandra into an unclear future. The woman had plans for her: what for - Amell couldn't say for certain. In the end, the warden sighed: at the very least she's guaranteed a friendly face - Leliana would make sure that nothing too drastic would happen to her.

Her injuries left her stiff, swollen joints, a result of being slammed into a few objects. There was a familiar burning on her left side, slightly soothed by liberally applied herbal balms: she also had the fun of skidding across a few unforgiving surfaces. Well, she was nothing if not a veteran of physical hardships. It took a few hesitant seconds to find her footing and then another few to make her way to the door, her muscles growing more confident as she stretched them. She was mobile - that is the best news she has for herself thus far.

The air outside was crisp and chilled by the north winds, smelling faintly of blacksmithing and open fires. The falling snow lightly dusted the rooftops and surfaces with a thin sheet of white. On her left was another cozy cottage with a figure leaning against the plank walls, overlooking the activity below on the campgrounds, ears undoubtedly pointed - it was the elven mage who claimed to have studied the Fade. "Solas?" Amell called as she ventured over the threshold, stepping over Dog that moved to take vigil under the overhang.

He turned, surprise and mild disapproval tinting his features, "You're awake - earlier than my estimates." He tilted his head in her direction, meticulously examining her for any obvious injuries that she could've incurred from moving too soon from her bed. He listened to her breaths, shortened
from her body's strain but not from any lingering inner injuries and, with her permission, took her hand to examine the mark of the rift, "it is not growing. That is good."

Cautiously closing the door behind her, (what did she have to fear for, there was no witch-hunt after her and the cottage was an ill-choice for a place to hide regardless) she rubbed a hand over her face, before offering a tired smile, "Thank you for healing me."

"It was not only me," Solas corrected as he turned his head back to the landscape: small camps encased by a wall made of timber, a frozen lake beyond the training fields of sparring soldiers, mountains further still. To his left, hanging in the sky was the Breach, a cyclone of green energy and clouds, casting a strange glow that left the area in a perpetual sunset, "I was not the one keeping your heart alive. I was there to make sure that the rune did not overtake you in your dreams."

"And what strange dreams I had," Amell mumbled, leaning against the fence, smiling wryly as she ran a hand through her hair. As the sounds of metal striking metal and of civilians bartering with merchants drifted to her ears, she struggled to grasp a vision that had struck her when she was sleeping, "there was a wolf at my door."

"Pardon?" Amell glanced over at the man standing at her side, dimly noting how his eyes grew larger in alarm and his entire body seemed to be touched by Winter's Breath. She cocked her head to the right, staring curiously at his reaction. Solas doesn't have the typical villaslin of the Dalish, but he does carry himself like one - and their mythology depicted a trickster god that took the form of a wolf, from what she could vaguely remember from the stories around the campfire in the Brecillian Forest. That was ten years ago - how time flies.

"I heard a wolf at my door," she enunciated, a wave of nausea overtaking her, her breath condensing into steam, "I dreamed of a," She closed her eyes and touched her forehead to the snow covered fence, regaining her bearings, and licked her lips, "Sorry. I think I'm rambling. Please do not mind me. I need to go and... Ahh... Collect myself." Without looking back, she made her way down the stairs and towards the main courtyard, slow and steady, careful to not trip over her own two feet. Dog was at her heels with a mouthful of dirty pantaloons.

Various people blatantly stared as she passed by, causing her to wonder if its because she looks as bad as she feels or that the rumors had been spread so quickly that people already recognized her on sight as Andraste's Herald. She turned left, away from the merchant that stood in front of a display of weaponry, eyes drifting from one vaguely interesting object to another, not entirely registering what she was seeing. Her feet kept moving - one in front of the other.

Was she imagining the wolf? Hallucinations did often reappear after her most challenging battles and a Pride demon would always count as something nightmare inducing. The Fifth Blight had been the worst - constant ambushes by the darkspawn to the point that her paranoia had her jumping at shadows. Dreams of Hespith's catechisms, werewolves howling, the voice of the Sloth demon that took residence in Kinloch Hold, the endless army of corpses in Redcliffe Castle - they all combined into a huge wall of writhing black - reaching out to her and taunting her willpower to keep going. Zevran woke her up from the worst of them. Not that Alistair was even better: on the mornings after, he would wash his hands continuously for hours straight if no one was there to stop him. Such is the plight of the Grey Wardens. It seemed pretty clear that she was going to soon have a whole new stash of horrors to behold.

That was how Cassandra Pentaghast found her: lost in her thoughts, staring dazedly at the trebuchets.
Cullen

It was on a lovely sunny day in Kirkwall, on a typical, regular patrol shift in the Gallows where he had a sudden revelation that he was to suffer the fate of having Amells hounding his every step. It did not matter whether he had been transferred out of Ferelden and placed some amount of distance between him and his memories, it did not matter if the majority of them went by the surname of Hawke, it did not matter if they had never even met her, they all inevitably reminded him of her. The first time he spotted Garrett Hawke with his brother, the dwarf, and the guard captain tailing behind, his first thought was, "apostate." His second thought was, "Maker. They have the same eyes." He didn't flinch - time had offered a buffer between his psyche though the scars that the desire demon had raked over him, scraping her claws down his skin lightly, not drawing blood, still stung back then. He didn't flinch when he met with the ragtag group in a semi-official setting at Wilmod's Camp, but he did allow himself to reminisce later, "I knew of an Amell once..." - the lopsided smile, the curious expression, the tendency to judge and make decisions based upon the people and not the ideal, the prowess in battle, the horrid and often ill-timed sense of humor...

Perhaps 'suffer' was a bit too strong of a word. The presence of Hawkes in Kirkwall brought back the familiar sense of longing that he had harbored immediately after he heard the news that Amell had been conscripted by the Grey Wardens. After the circle nearly broke, that longing turned quickly to anger at her unwillingness to purge the tower of mages. When she left for the last time, talking quietly to First Enchanter Irving about allowing a dwarf into those bleak walls, he couldn't even bear to look at her, not when all he could see was supple breasts decorated with golden chains, a feminine hips scantily clothed, black eyes - Desire wearing her face, a head adorned with curling horns.

Ten years has passed since his ill-begotten comments to that woman, ten years of painful recovery. Initially, with the blood stains still unwashed from the walls and floors of the tower, he was inundated in nightmares and unpredictable fluxes of brutality toward his charges that forced Knight Commander Gregoir to transfer him to Kirkwall. There, he clenched onto Meredith Stannard's stance on mage-templar relations like a lifeline: a harsh stance of unremitting vigilance and harsh measures were necessary for the safety of all. He had agreed with her until the very end until he could no longer ignore how her insanity has completely taken her. The knowledge that templars, people that he had looked up to as a child, the Order that he had sworn into, the Order that could be just as corrupt and as terrible, was as bitter pill to swallow. Tainted power was not only reserved to mages.

There is a red lyrium statue greeting all who enters Kirkwall through the Gallows depicting a woman on her knees looking towards the skies. There is a rumor that one could still hear her scream but only if one ventures close enough. No one dares. It was the last thing he saw before he boarded the ship out of the city.

He was not the same man that Amell had known before she joined the wardens, neither was he the same man that Amell had known when she returned to save the Circle. There was an unsettling dichotomy within him - circling dual forces of fondness and conflict that was morphing into a restless energy that he needed to release, growing within him since Cassandra has sent ahead a messenger to assemble the Inquisition's advisors. He was an active man by nature and he was languishing in the war room, pacing anxiously, drawing a raised eyebrow from the Ambassador and a knowing look from Sister Nightingale (not that she was any more dignified: Amell was an old friend of hers too and it was easy to see her impatience in the way she kept tapping her writing utensil against the clipboard). A part of him preferred to be outside, supervising his men and working on troop assignments as per his role as Commander but the other part of him was... Not dreading, but anticipating.

The door flew open. Seeker Cassandra strolled purposefully into the chamber, muttering darkly under her breath about Chancellor Roderick and his definition of heretics. Amell drifted in behind
her like a personal shadow, seemingly distracted by her own thoughts, a small shift of fabrics, the absence of sound of shoes padding along the stone floors, and the sudden pungent scent of embrium and elfroot announced her presence, her gait sluggish yet elegant, resembling the Dalish that roam the forests. Years of traversing the wilds had added noticeable fluidity to the way she moves. Varric was right: she looked tired - faded bruises peeked out underneath her collar; her eyes were lined with dark circles that contrasted sharply with the tattoos on her face.

Cassandra's voice washed over the individuals in the chamber in high and low cadences, the lilting Nevarran accent punctuated some syllables and soared over others. The Seeker still had scratches that came from the original explosion at the Conclave and the resulting battle to stall the growth of the Breach. Her strong gestures towards each member of the Inquisition was given with deference; her eyes offered a clear view of her fatigue - consequences from the death of the Divine had accelerated at an unprecedented rate. More and more reports from trustworthy scouts scattered across the continent gave disheartening accounts on how Thedas shifted to accommodate the self-proclaimed Inquisition and... Well... Chancellor Roderick was a pup with no teeth compared to the greater powers in Orlais that participated in the Great Game.

"Cullen?"

Her eyes (there was no demon lurking beneath them) focused on his face, flitting across his features, searching for something in his expression. She stood less than an arm's length away, stunned into temporary muteness. He took a moment to drink in her appearance: her hair was cut to her shoulders, held back by weaved pieces of string and ribbons, she was leaner than he remembered, musculature resulting from countless combat experiences. He took her hand into his: there were callouses that indicated an individual who not only used a staff but also one who used a great sword. Cullen tried to imagine the situation from her end: arrested as a murderer, raised to the position of Herald - and realizing that she was found by old faces in the Inquisition. They stood on unequal ground. He had an entire night, sleepless that it was in his anxiety, to prepare for this meeting; she had not.

Amell's gaze continued to wander, assessing his stance and posture. "Is it really you?" She murmured, expression absent of any loathing. It was at that moment that he realized that she was waiting for his reaction. Ten years had passed since his ill-begotten comments to her; ten years of wondering if he still hated her. Cullen swallowed; that was something he can work with.

Smiling, fighting the urge to rub his neck, he gently squeezed her hand and struggled not to stammer through his words, "I look forward to seeing what we can do together, Ame- Herald."

Those words, not enough to convey his apologies, desires, and a hundred thousand of other emotions that he wished for her to know, were sufficient for the moment. She relaxed her posture and happily acknowledged his optimism. The blood pounding in his ears obscured her reply but... she was smiling (the same one she offered him when she had passed him in the halls as an apprentice) at him. Amell's hand slipped out of his grasp as she turned back to the war table, prodding at one of the pieces inquiringly; Sister Leliana stepped forward to begin the briefing.

The charged tension in the air dissipated; the connection between them broke - leaving him feeling momentarily bereft. At the edge of his periphery, he noticed Ambassador Josephine Montilyet staring avidly at him like he was currently the most interesting specimen in the room before she was drawn into the conversation. He ducked his head as he felt heat creeping up his cheeks, busying himself with his own reports. Seeker Cassandra scoffed at a suggestion that Amell made that had Sister Leliana uncharacteristically laughing under her breath.

Among the dim light offered by the candles, under the auspices of the will of the war council, the structure of the Inquisition slowly began to take shape.
"Into darkness, unafraid."

The clamor of people bartering for goods, the ring in the air as metal struck against metal, the scent of meat being cooked over the fires - Commander Cullen rubbed his forehead as he witnessed two recruits collapse onto the icy grounds as they simultaneously lost their footing. For the time being, he'll let Cassandra correct their technique since she's more inclined to aim the blunt side of her shield at any offending knees that were just an inch out of alignment than yelling out advice from across the field. The sun was disappearing behind the Frostback Mountains, leaving a myriad of shades of reds, oranges, purples streaking across the sky - the meeting had taken the entire day. A servant was brought in at one point with a plate of small sandwiches, but that seemed like ages ago. His own notes from the meeting spanned five pages in cramped handwriting.

"Telling the public that you are not only the proclaimed Herald but also the Hero of Ferelden would benefit the Inquisition," Josephine had tapped her pen on her cheek in thought, "your accomplishments are not easily forgotten. Saving Ferelden from the Fifth Blight is no small feat."

"I can send messengers to Alistair," Leliana had added, a hip propped against the edge of the table, "Backing from a King would help us on our path to recognition, favor, and legitimacy. Not that Orlesian Chantry really cares about Ferelden politics - it's a start." The spymaster made a moue as she scribbled out a small note and set it aside, next to the piece that sat on the north-east corner of the map.

"That's the most you're going to get out of having me, I'm afraid." Amell had sighed, twirling a small feather absentmindedly through her fingers. "My influence is not as high as you would think and especially does not have the far reaches of what the late Divine believed."

Cassandra had frowned, "But as Warden Commander of Ferelden, you should be able to mobilize your troops." She gestured downward to piece that marked the location of Amaranthine, "Sister Leliana could not find you at the arling but you must have at least spent some of the last ten years building up the Grey Wardens. What we are fighting are not darkspawn but I doubt that there are many things higher in priority than tears in the veil separating this world from the Fade."

"Oh, believe me, I would if I could." laughing hollowly, the mage fidgeted, straightening her collar, playing with the map pieces, unwilling to look at any of the advisors in the eye, "The problem is, well, to put it bluntly, that the Wardens are dying." Silence pierced the room: shocked silence, inquiring silence, accusatory silence, demanding silence. Amell closed her eyes and kneaded the skin between her eyes, "I'll start again, since this is most likely relevant to the crisis on hand. A few months ago, I received a missive from Warden Commander Larius from the Vimmark Mountains who warned me of some radical notions made by senior warden Janeka. She was searching for the blood descendants of one Malcolm Hawke."

"Hawke? Why would the Wardens be looking for Hawke?" Cullen had muttered, eyeing Cassandra as her scowl deepened.

Slowly a story had begun to unfold: a letter from a Commander of the Grey believed to be dead, a pursuit from the Waking Sea all the way to Haven that yielded not clues but destruction, a false Calling which timing matched the disappearance of a notable darkspawn that was locked in the Warden prison tower, suspicious connections between persons of interest from too different backgrounds to be coincidental. There was an
undercurrent of grim determination in the war room as the inhabitants recognized that their common enemy, whatever they knew of him/her/it was only beginning to scratch the surface.

Suddenly, there was a significant drop in volume in the commotion on the battlements; men and women paused in their training and turned toward his direction, some pointing and whispering. He turned around. Amell was descending from the main gates, taking two steps at a time, sparing a glance toward the smithy, the stables, the wild nugs, and view of the frozen lake. He nodded to her as she jogged over to his side, uncaring of the curious looks they drew. "I didn't expect to see you again," she greeted, "I always thought that if we were to ever meet again, it would be on opposite sides on a hill of swords." Amell's smile was strained as as she referenced the Mage-Templar War that still ravaged the lands throughout Thedas, "There were rumors, afterwards, that you've gone mad, slayed three apprentices, and fled the Order. I'm glad it wasn't that. It's nice to see you again, Cullen."

"The Maker has watched over you, Amell," he replied, reaching up to brush some strands of hair out of her face out of habit, before letting the offending hand drop as he suddenly was made aware of the number of eyes still trained upon them by the growing chatter. She ducked her head, but not before he could see a blush creeping across her facial tattoos. "I," He coughed, struggling to regain his professional bearing, "these past events must be trying for you. You're not too overwhelmed, are you?"

She tilted her head back but still avoided his direct gaze, a grimace replacing her smile, "I won't lie. I've been better. The Calling, you see, I'm scared that its getting stronger despite Flemeth's amulet blocking off the worst," she gestured at the pendant resting just beneath her collarbone, reflecting ethereal light that seemed to come from an inner source, steadily leaking ancient power. "I might need to ask Solas but I think the mark of the rift is making me more susceptible though it seems to be stopped by some amount of will power - which the Inquisition helps me with - it offers a sense of purpose to do some good in this world..." Rubbing her head, she stepped back and nervously began drawing small circles into the dirt with her toe. "I digress. I'm still heavily medicated. Sorry that you had to listen to all that."

"I enjoyed this talk," Cullen hurriedly responded, "I mean," His hand crept to the back of his neck, "It would be nice if we can do this again sometime when you're better. If you ever need someone to talk to... As a friend, of course. I'm always here."

Her eyes widened, "I don't..." She chewed anxiously on her bottom lip, bringing a hand up to tug at stray strands of her hair, "Cullen. I'm not forcing you into accepting-"

"Amell, I want to," He grabbed her shoulders (careful, she was still recovering), willing her to understand, "As... I understand that it's been ten years. We are both different people from the templar and the apprentice at Kinloch Hold, Maker, we are both Commanders, but I hope that we can rekindle... I mean, rebuild our friendship." (There's still so much work to do. The Inquisition demands so much of his time. But the path is already set and his feelings are an eventuality, no matter how much he tries to concentrate on his role in the organization. And maybe this time around, when he does fall in love with her again, if it has not already happened, hopefully he will not fall too fast and maybe she'll... She'll...) "We can catch up whenever you're ready, when you come back. Over chess?" He hesitantly asked and he dared not hope, because if she can give him even this much...

"Herald! We are departing!" Seeker Cassandra called out, a solid shield gleaming in the sunlight strapped to her back. She was carrying a selection of swords and loading them onto the caravan with a furrow in her brow. Varric emerged from the gate polishing his beloved crossbow. The elven Hedge mage was securing the fastenings of his staff, squinting at the sun as if trying to determine the
Amell placed her hands over his and gently eased his grip off of her, "I would like that," She remarked, a hazy smile, a twinkle in her eye that was visible despite drowsiness from the many herbal remedies she had imbibed. The southern tower sounded the horn; a great procession arrived to see the party off. The quest was suspected to last a few days to a few weeks, depending on the resources found and reception that the Herald receives there. Offering one last salute, the mage stepped back and ran towards the expedition team. He watched as her figure slowly grew smaller as she increased her speed with Fade Steps, leaving behind faint impressions in the air with every spell, until he could not decipher her from the silhouettes of her fellow men as they slowly marched to the western parts of the Hinterlands to search for Mother Giselle.

**Varric**

She walked like someone who isn't used to paved roads, conjuring memories of Daisy working in and around the Kirkwall Alienage the month right after her self-exile from her clan. It was hard to believe that the only figure that Hawke (sarcastic, free-spirited, stubborn Hawke) had at one point idolized the distant Hero of Ferelden cousin. It was even harder to believe that their resemblance, both inner and outer, were so canny, despite them having never met. Their hair was a similar blue-black shade, their eyes were the same light gray in shape and degree of vivacity, they had the same lopsided smile. Not only that, they both had the same terrible sense of humor and the rather blase view of the world that sought to shock and awe them by throwing them into increasingly impossible situations. Hawke would be amused to learn that the Warden Commander was essentially him in a slighter, more feminine body. Varric attempted to mentally conjure a tale where Hawke becomes a warden and saving all of Ferelden from the Fifth Blight. Hawke would probably leave behind a trail of dead, dazed, and confused, shaking the world down to its noble roots, which, now that Varric thought about it, was probably what the Herald had done.

Which would explain the double-takes that he kept seeing Knight Captain Cullen give Hawke whenever the group was wandering around the Gallows all those years ago. Varric continued to ponder, tapping his chin with a crossbow bolt as the memories, bittersweet yet comforting, continued to summon themselves. The rumors rampant in Kirkwall about the Knight Captain's illicit history with the mage warden were, as he had believed, too fantastical, too harlequin romantic to be true - and yet Varric's eyes do not deceive him - he has seen the shattered glass and the past shadows of a shattered heart. Granted, there had to be a reason why Knight Commander Meredith punished anyone who talked about the supposed affair within the Templar Order if not for the degree of truth in the gossip. Varric would have given his manuscript of the latest chapter of *Swords and Shields* to get a look into the war room when they reunited. Maybe Ruffles will be willing to part with the information. Maybe the mage in question would be willing to answer his inquiries.

Varric glanced back and... His brow furrowed in confusion.

Happily humming a simple tune (Curly hummed the same song when he's in a particular mood), Amell sat on the back of the last wagon above a canvas that covered their total camping supplies, running a whetstone over the edge of a standard issued Ferelden sword. "Two questions, Herald" She looked up, startled at the sudden break in silence, "Didn't you have a staff with you when we were at the Breach? And do you have a spare weapon kit on you?"

"Huh. You're the first one to ask me that." She confided with a quirk in her lips, tucking the sword back into its scabbard and wiping her hands on her mail, "Here. I suppose congratulations are in order, as well as a prize. All I have on me that I'm willing to part is an unused pocket handkerchief.
You're not missing your entire kit, I hope. I would loose faith in your abilities." Mockingly serious, she offered said handkerchief with an outstretched hand, light blue with little golden embroidered flowers at the corners, which was not at the quality of his own oilcloth that he had lost some hours back in the mountains but just as well (and she had undoubtedly noticed that and his boredom).

He plucked the offending piece of cloth out from her fingers with a bemused nod of thanks, dabbed some polisher onto it, and rubbed down Bianca for what it seems to be the fifth time today. Surface dwarf that he was, he was still a dwarf, and dwarves needed to be kept from idleness. "I thought that mages using swords are about as common as a templar using a staff." Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Cassandra lead the group, peering into the thick undergrowth in search for signs of life. She barked orders at a handful of men who saluted her and dove ahead. "I'm surprised Seeker hasn't asked yet."

"Probably because Leliana told her a long time ago back when they were still looking for little old me," Amell mused as she fell back against the pile, sighing as she craned her neck back to stare at the foliage above her, "And Solas would already know."

"Elf mages know how to fight with swords?" As he tested Bianca's automatic spring loads (still a bit stiff, maybe it was the humidity that was affecting the wood), Varric tried to imagine Daisy effortlessly swinging around Hayder's Razor and failed miserably.

"The dead art of the Arcane Warrior was once known among the elves," flicking a wrist, Amell held out an arm that began to glow, tracing a white lined pattern that crawled and spread, not unlike that of Broody's lyrium veins. "By pumping magic through your muscles you get warrior like qualities: augmented strength, ability to wield unwieldy swords. Since I lost my favorite dragonbone staff at the explosion at the Conclave, no other staff would compare to the ease of combat with an actual sword... Though I left all of my best swords with Nathaniel... Huh, I guess I could ask the Inquisition to send a letter," she trailed off, staring thoughtfully at her fingertips as they emitted small sparks of lightning.

He waited patiently while inwardly counting to ten (she had the habit of falling asleep mid conversation - he chalked it up to the fact that she was still healing) and then prompted her, "It's not dead if there's at least one user out there. Can Chuckles do the same?"

"I don't think so; you don't see him with anything sharp and pointy on him." Amell swung her legs idly over the edge, "I found a phylactery in the Lower Brecillian Ruins when I was trying to broker peace or a ceasefire between werewolves and elves, back when I was still trying to mobilize troops during the Blight." She said that in the same tone that Hawke usually used whenever he announced that he was going out to Hightown Market to buy armor upgrades and came back instead covered in spider remains. "It's actually pretty similar to being a Knight Enchanter from Orlais, I heard. But I like to think that I'm better than any run-of-the-mill Orlesian mage." She fell back to humming the same tune from prior; her rise and fall in tone matched that of the drifting wind around them. Varric continued to calibrate his crossbow's scope and checked the cross hairs for accuracy, fingers moving around with nothing to guide them but muscle memory.

The dwarf rubbed his hands together, trying to force some heat into his fingertips. The Hinterlands were unforgiving in the winter, even during midday, especially when one spent the whole day doing nothing but walking and resting on the caravans. It was a far cry from Kirkwall and its polarized sectors of rich and poor. It was far cry from Sundermount and its lack of vegetation. He sighed - another day, another fight, another apocalyptic scenario - at least the people were nice... somewhat.

A small rustling sound caught his attention; Amell had reached into her pack and pulled out a familiar looking book. Slowly drifting off into her own world, she murmured softly as she read, but
he could easily make out the words - familiar in content, how could they not be? He wrote the book. He considered gifting her the entire series for her; she clearly uses the books as a way to take the edge off from the expectations that the Haven pilgrims and worshippers have placed on her shoulders.

Donnen Brennokovic didn't stand on ceremony. He strode through the barracks and slammed open the door to the captain's office without so much as a nod to the guards he passed.

Just barely dawn, and already Captain Hendallen was buried beneath a mountain of paperwork taller than the Vinmarks. All Donnen could see of the captain was her fiery hair and an angry gaze that had stopped more than one pickpocket mid-grift.

"Captain, I need a warrant for the Comte de Favre." Even as the words left his lips, Donnen knew they were a mistake.

The Captain rose to her feet. "Brennokovic." The way she spoke his name was like a portcullis slamming shut. "Where's my report on the Hightown Market body?" It was the kind of question you might ask a truant child, the kind where you already knew the answer and just wanted to see someone squirm in guilt.

The Herald's mabari returned from their trail, bounding over a few boulders before stopping at her feet with a mouthful of royal elfroot, dripping with drool but still usable if Adan didn't adamantly complain. Amell carefully extracted the herbs, praising him as he settled down at the edge of the wagon, curled up and slowly drifted off to sleep. She gave the mabari one last sad look. Despite his past prowess in battle, he was a canvas of battle scars, of unhealed wounds new and old - he was barely battle ready anymore, especially after the fight with the Pride Demon, and had retired from a weapon to a faithful companion.

"Rogue templars ahead!" Cassandra shouted from the front as the caravan froze in its tracks. Flashes of blue steel and war cries distinguished themselves from the ambient lights and sounds of nature. "Hold your ground! Everyone capable of fighting, to me! Varric, covering fire!" The mabari snuffled in his slumber, uncaring of the imminent fight ahead. Amell was already standing from her perch, tucking *Hard in Hightown* back into her satchel and drawing her sword. Her eyes glittered: a little dark, a little blood thirsty.

"Andraste's flaming sword," cursing, he readied Bianca, taking comfort in the smooth transition sounds of gears sliding into place and the promise of pinpoint precision, "It was bound to happen sooner or later. Seems like they need you up there. Time to put your money where your mouth is, Herald," he said, sliding a bolt in place.

"I'll cut them down so quickly they won't even have time to activate a Spell Purge," Amell giddily laughed as the sword begins to glow, a dull scent of ozone permeating the area as her magic manifested, "Feast your eyes, Varric Tethras." And she leaped headfirst into the skirmish.
Cullen

It was by the fourth time that he visited her in her cottage that she started developing the habit of preparing another mug of hot tea beside her own, making sure that it was extra strong. "I would stop you since it can't be good for your health," Amell shrugged as she refilled his drink, "but that would make me a hypocrite," she gestured towards the rest of her living space which was so cluttered that not even the floorboards were visible. Tomes on magic, the past Blights, and the Fade stood in one corner like a makeshift fortress that children often play in. (Laying guiltily on top of the drawer is a well-leafed through copy of the latest Hard in Hightown.) A large map of Ferelden and Orlais covered up an entire wall decorated with pins, notes, writings, string, and the occasional dagger thrown in frustration. Various staves and swords leaned haphazardly against the dresser. Covering every surface were reports gathered from the war table, each in a different state of revision and rewrites.

Cullen picked one up and skimmed it. He recognized his own handwriting, suggesting more men to travel to Val Royeaux as a show of force against the remaining Chantry dissenters that did not support the Inquisition. Further underneath are proposals made by Lady Josephine and Sister Nightingale. Diplomacy, secrets, or forces? Which missions required a heavy hand? Which needed the gentle touch? A noise of frustration caused him to look up; he watched as she attempted to bring the flames in the fireplace back to life with a stick and some magic, trying not to overfeed the embers. "Still having problems with control after all these years?" He sat down and leafed through the reports that she had set aside for him to take.

She flushed, "yes," she admitted without glancing back, "but I am better-" and yelped when a burst of fire erupted under her hands, scrambling backwards with a hand clutching at her shirt. Slowly, the kettle hanging above from the mantle began to whistle. She stood with the remains of her dignity and dusted off her pants. A small smile crept into the corners of his mouth and he tried his hardest not to laugh.

Instead, he took a sip from his cup, reveling in the warm heat as it traveled down to his core, feeling warmer as he turned his gaze toward the frosted windows. The scythe moon encased the grounds outside in a low blue glow. The snowfall was heavier than the previous evenings; the refugees and recruits of Haven have all sequestered themselves into groups, some into their tents and houses, others into the Chantry and the tavern. Songs of the holy, songs of the raucous, all drifting through one another, creating a cacophony of humanness. Hope. As she searched through her pile of reports, Amell hummed a small tune that he recognized from his life a decade ago. Her mabari slept soundly in the corner and snuffled when she nudged him to get at some of the documents underneath.

It took four visits to her cottage before she relaxed in his presence, absolutely certain that he wasn’t suffering by seeing her. He wanted to tell her that it was not her: the fear had never came from her (though regrettably it took him years to realize that), the fault laid with the desire demon. But that spoken sentiment would lead to the topic of Uldred and his rebellion of which he was still not ready
to talk about. So he tried to convey companionship, camaraderie, maybe a chance of something more, through his actions. It had gone as well as he could hope for. Cullen sighed and lost himself to his thoughts.

In Kinloch Hold, templars gossiped as much as mages - given enough time in close quarters, the brotherhood established was one that inevitably turns able-bodied men in their prime into grandmothers of a knitting circle. Topics varied from Knight Commander Gregoir's recent changes in training regimens to the headcook's bright idea to utilize whatever uncommon ingredient of the day into their evening meals to who can bribe the quartermaster to give up some of his more upgraded equipment. Of course, as a group of men either single or away from their families, all conversations had eventually gravitated to the provocative. Which Chantry sister would be most willing to offer the unspoken set of services? Which mage would succumb to the idea of a forbidden love? (Petra, the apprentice healer of senior mage Wynne, was a frequent favorite: her appeal was a loving smile and a warm hand filled with soothing magic that could relieve any pain. It was hard not to get too attached to her.) Shared fantasies barely replaced the physical urges and hunger for another warm body beside them in bed.

But no one had talked about Amell that way. As a recruit, Cullen had often wondered why, at least until his patrols began to match her own schedule.

She had, even at a young age, been a bit too wild in her casting, a bit too powerful, and a bit too avid in her pursuit of knowledge for the templars to relax around her. Her coloring was a bit too exotic. Her socials skills a bit out of the norm and it had set her apart from her peers. She wasn't alone though. She had Jowan. And later, a few years before her Harrowing, after the incident, she had him.

"Cullen?" Amell voice, suddenly very close, jolting him out of his thoughts. She had folded herself into a chair directly across from him, one hand clenching onto a steaming cup of tea as she slowly blew at the surface. Tendrils of steam rose and unfurled. An index finger tapped on a folded letter that sat on the table between them and pushed it towards him: an unspoken invitation, "How well do you know Hawke? You were in Kirkwall together, right?"

"Yes, but we were not close." He opened the letter. The Amell crest greeted him in the upper right hand corner: scrawled handwriting, multiple words written, crossed out, and rewritten, a voice that was half respect and half sass introduced himself as a second cousin and The Champion of Kirkwall. (As a gesture of goodwill, Hawke had already tracked down and destroyed her phylactery, a mere formality due to her position in the Grey Wardens.) News of the Inquisition must be spreading quickly if Hawke, a man on the run and eluding just about every seeker and templar roaming the lands, found out that his cousin was the Herald. "I've worked with him a few times prior to the Circle Rebellion. You would probably get more stories from Varric."

She ran a hand through her hair and sighed in frustration, "I did. Varric told me of the one-on-one duel with the Arishok and how he earned the title of Champion. Did you know that Hawke ran figure eights between the pillars endlessly for hours dodging the Arishok's attacks, only stopping occasionally to send out a Winter's Grasp? Truth is stranger than fiction, I guess," She idly traced small patterns into the grain of the table before flicking her wrist at the letter, "But that is where his stories end. I want to know afterwards: life as a Champion, before the rebellion. Maybe figuring out why it happened can help me figure out how to stop it. I want to know how he influenced the tensions between the Order and the Circle without being a part of either. But Varric wouldn't budge and his books aren't detailed enough. I just," she raised her shoulders and then dropped them, "thought maybe another perspective would help."

He leaned over his mug, silent as he contemplated the city and the twisted perceptions of its people. "It was not a pleasant time," he began, deliberate and careful in his words, "Tensions then were
rising. Blood magic was practiced within the Gallows; at the same time, templars advocated the Rite of Tranquility upon anyone they deemed suspicious. Both sides were at fault. Hawke did the best he could. My opinion is that no one could've stopped the rebellion from starting." She turned away, staring outside as the wind continues to slap against the glass panes, flexing her fingers as cold seeped back into her extremities. He debated whether to offer her his coat but pushed the thought aside: at where they are at this moment, she might run, winter storm or not. Maker, she was still beautiful.

She released a long breath, "I suppose I should be grateful, not to be a part of that horror." She propped her elbows on the table; she was so close he could smell faint traces of embrium and magic. Shaking his head, Cullen leaned back and closed his eyes, envisioning an alternate universe where she could've easily been under the mentorship of First Enchanter Orsino instead of First Enchanter Irving, living in fear of Knight Commander Meredith. He tried to imagine her tranquil, because with her temperament and her talent, even if she had done no harm, she would've been one of the first to undergo the Rite under Ser Alrik's solution. He tried to imagine the symbol of the Chantry on her forehead, dead grey eyes, a monotonous voice, unable to feel the passion that had defined her character. He swallowed dryly and clenched his hands tightly. She didn't notice his agony as she continued to muse, "There were stories circulating from the mages that were conscripted into the warden. 'In Kirkwall, it was better dead than tranquil,' they told me. But I could hardly imagine..."

She turned back, stricken from the possibilities of what could have been, and placed a hand over his - he did not move away, "Cullen, did you..."

"No," he managed to choke out, his own voice distant from his ears. "But that was a bad time for me. I'm not proud of that part of me. Amell, the way that I saw mages... I'm not sure I would have done if I had seen you." He could feel the heat of the fire at the back of his neck and the warmth of their joined fingers. His voice descended into a whisper, that despite the ambient noises from the fire, from her own breath, from the world outside, were clear and true, "And that thought scares me."

Vivienne

The double doors of the Haven Chantry opened, revealing a dark interior, decor that hasn't seen proper light or a good cleaning in years. It smelled stale from old mothballs. Dust littered the high ends of the upholstery. At best, the area was the symbolic stronghold of the Inquisition, no matter how poorly constructed it was for that purpose. It wasn't the chateau of Duke Bastien de Ghislain but it was manageable - given some time, effort, and imported goods, she could make a little part of it hers. The high ceilings were comforting to her, unlike the small cottages littering the grounds around Haven - cozy, but not one was fitted to her standards.

Though used to leading, Madame Vivienne stood a ways back behind both the Herald and the newest addition, a young elven archer with no understanding of manners, as they walked through the halls, garnering curious looks from the gossipers that sought to seek some shelter from the winds outside. There hadn't been enough time between offering her services to the Herald and the present where Ambassador Montilyet has finally procured the necessary documents that officiated their stay as members of the Inquisition under the Herald's command and were available in her office to be collected for the Orlesian mage to inspect and judge. Vivienne needed more time to observe, to make her inferences and character evaluations before she could confidently maneuver and fit herself into the Herald's inner circle.

"So," Sera sidled up to the Herald, casually bumping shoulders, "normal human, normal looking - you'd expect something bigger when hearing the stories."
"Sorry to disappoint," her voice, laced with mild humor, was low and soft when not seeking attention from others: a habit most likely ingrained into her during her time at the Circle when close proximity to her peers did not require raised tones. "What would you have expected me to be?"

Sera shrugged, a pointed ear twitched in agitation, "Dunno. When I say Hero of Ferelden and Herald of Andraste, what should I think?"

It was a question that puzzled all of Thedas. Vivienne could recall with great clarity the gossip between nobles ten years ago. Many members of the court had agreed to wait for the Blight to decimate Ferelden before sending in their own men and women, believing that with Ferelden weakened, Empress Celene could annex the lands and expand her reach and influence over the barbaric dog lovers. The response to the news that the Fifth Blight was stopped nearly single handedly by a pair of Grey Wardens was immediate denial. Some scholars thought that the Ferelden Wardens did not fight a true Blight. Still, others pointed out that the outcome of the Battle of Denerim relied upon the slaying of the Archdemon, an entity whose presence defines a Blight.

"Well, you're Ferelden and I'm Ferelden and I heard that Commander what's-his-name is Ferelden and a lot of recruits are from Ferelden," Sera announced in her halting style of speech, linking arms with her declared new friend, "we should all get together and smell like wet dog. Wicked Grace later, yeah?"

Though the Herald is culturally Ferelden, Vivienne refused to allow who could possibly be the next holy icon to be swayed and influenced by a city elf who belonged in a group that believed dropping jars of bees on nobles' heads was the height of hilarity. "Lady Amell can trace her lineage back to a noble family in Kirkwall," Vivienne icily stated. The Herald certainly did not look Ferelden. Black hair in itself is a rare trait seen in the south. Black hair and grey eyes? Anyone who had lessons in the nobility class of Thedas knew that the combination was due to Amell blood.

"Doesn't mean that she is raised by your people, Vivvy," Sera leaned back, using the Herald's arm as a point of leverage, to turn and stick out her tongue, "During the Blight, she helped the little people in Denerim. I know. I was there." Which was a bit of a stretch. Judging by the elf's age, she was but a child ten years ago and would be hard-pressed to remember any details, most likely shielded in her mother's bosom from the harsh battles outside where armies slayed the darkspawn. But that comment was enough to pique Warden Amell's curiosity, who turned and asked her questions of her upbringing. Sera basked in the attention while Vivienne retreated back to her thoughts, pondering upon the state of the world that lived past the Blight.

Even the stories of the wardens post-Blight proved to be too outlandish for many Orlesians to believe but the results left in their wake proved to make those claims undeniable. After taking his place on the throne as King of Ferelden, Alistair Theirin killed an Antivan prince and defeated a Tevinter magister with only a handful of companions, one rumoring to be the Arishok. Warden Amell, a mage who was speculated to have struck the killing blow to the Archdemon, quickly reformed a dying Arling into a city to be feared in its own right. Though it seemed that she had a less exciting life than her counterpart, many keen admirers found a pattern in her long excursions outside of Amaranthine: simply put, when she ventured out of reach, strange things happened in Thedas - a revolution, the sudden rebuild of an abandoned Keep, sudden disquiet in what seemed to be an inevitable war between feuding families, men, women, rogues, warriors, and mages all disappeared after being personally conscripted by the Commander of the Grey, only to come back years later with strength that one had to experience to believe. For the latter, more rumors surrounded her than actual facts - compared to the king, she was an outright enigma and the Great Game favors enigmas.

"I got a toy, a painted box when I was little," Sera continued, "from the Friends of Red Jenny. They said that you gave it to them." Noble stories, fantastical stories, stories of humble origin - the Hero of
Ferelden has gain a plethora of them and no one but her knew which was right and which was wrong. As Sera chatted, Vivienne managed to catch Lady Amell's eye from behind and to her surprised delight, received a small bow, more than an inclination of her head, but not bold enough to be noticed by their third party member.

'We'll talk later,' said the gesture. Feeling pleased, Madame Vivienne gathered her robes about her and swept away towards the office of Lady Ambassador. The warden did know minor rules pertaining to the Great Game; she was not wholly uncivilized like the rest of Ferelden - and she might have some potential in her to appear in court. Sister Nightingale did predict an inevitable meeting between the Empress and the Inquisition in a formal setting, under the prying eyes of those in power. With proper training, the Herald will not embarrass the organization. Madame Vivienne left, assured that Lady Amell will find her later and that, in a more proper setting, they will talk.

Surely not all the stories of her were true. It was completely preposterous: the time lines of the tales easily overlapped, and sometimes, the facts directly contradicted each other. Years swept by. The fervor and adoration had died out eventually like a smothered wildfire as people moved onto more interesting pieces of gossip (the Champion of Kirkwall rose to prominence at around this time).

And just as her narrative seems to come to a close, as time passed and her accomplishments withdrew into the distant memory, the Hero of Ferelden emerged into the public as the Herald of Andraste. Was this the will of the Maker? Was she handpicked by the prophet? There was no answer. There was only more questions.

Amell

"Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow."

Amell frowned, tapping a finger against her arm as she interjected impatiently, "In their blood, the Maker's will is written,"

Mother Giselle could not contain her surprise; the usual composed mien was disrupted by a faint widening of her eyes. There was no need to be surprised. Mages of the Circle had the chant drilled into them starting from their induction - endless hours before the banner of the Chantry and the towering statue of Andraste, a row of templars behind them, vigilant as if the mere words of the Maker could vanish away their magic and removed that ingrained sin. The place of worship was a place of reluctance among the apprentices and a place of either resentment or reverence among the Harrowed - depending on whether the life long conversion was successful or not, depending on whether said mage really believed.

Leliana was fully aware that Amell did not, could not, would not contain even a fraction of Wynne's spiritual leanings and had most likely forewarned the Chantry woman so she wouldn't get too offended. Perhaps she was shocked because of the hostility emitted when the words were recited. "Benedictions 4:11. They sound rather nice, don't they, Revered Mother?" Amell leaned back against the stone column, a candlelight on either side hanging from a vertical surface, "little pretty words decorating a banner of heaven - controlling a magical population through fear and mage hunters." Stuffing her hands into her pockets, she deflated from her previous crossness. Mother Giselle is a nice woman; Amell had met plenty of good and bad people in the Chantry and it wouldn't be fair to paint such a broad brush over them, especially when mages tended to take extreme ends of the spectrum.

Minaeve strolled past with an armful of fangs and spirit essences. Madame Vivienne, sequestered in
her little niche of the Haven Chantry, was penning some letters to members of the Orlesian court. Mother Giselle's hand rested on her arm, over her restless hand, "Oh child, what has the world done to you?" Their debate over Chantry reformation was forgotten in the face of whatever the elder woman had seen in her eyes - opaque bitterness and grim thoughts that did not come naturally to her but was a necessary and inevitable result of the last decade.

Amell had no words, so she settled for smiling in a faintly apologetic manner until the Chantry woman gave her space. She has a twisted relationship with the Chant of Light. The rhythmic trance of the verses used to lull her to sleep on the bench until a senior mage slapped her wrists with the blunt end of a staff. They were catechisms. They were poetry. They reminded her of a time when all she had to worry about was friends, keeping Jowan in line, and learning the secrets of magic. Maybe that's why she still guiltily reads the Chant after her worst moments, to regain that feeling of a carefree Amell staring at the ceiling of Kinloch Hold, wondering what stars looked like, and maybe the words are still a comfort like a blanket in the darkness, and maybe the Maker does love her in the same way that he loves non-mages.

The incident at Val Royeaux still rankled, like small bugs crawling lightly over her skin. The Templars have dismissed any idea of allying with the Inquisition. Lord Seeker Lucius has, according to Cassandra, gone mad, and Grand Enchanter Fiona (the woman looked awfully familiar... Have they ever met before?) had extended an invitation to Redcliffe. Amell had accepted the proposal for an alliance but there was something missing and that intuition had not stopped prodding at her sixth sense since then. The situation was off, like uneven scales, somewhere, somehow - the offer seemed false in pretense but she couldn't place her finger down on why or how. Was she being paranoid?

A hand went up to rub at her face; she felt nearly faint from exhaustion - the Calling becomes more powerful when she is in this weakened state. (Leliana pushed the tentative meeting with the rebel mages a week back; Amell could kiss her out of happiness.) It was not paranoia as much as an ingrained sense of survival instincts - one could never ignore those; she had learned that the hard way these past ten years.

(Maker, her head hurts.)

How things have changed since the Blight... How everyone has changed since the Blight... Alistair is, between her and Queen Anora's stubborn determination that required long, long nights of lectures and copious amounts of whiskey, a decent king, a good king. Leliana is a far cry from the lay sister and bard who had a weakness for dancing shoes and stared unabashedly at Morrigan's cleavage. Cullen is not... Amell winced.

"Don't touch me! Stay away! Sifting through my thoughts... Tempting me with the only thing I always wanted but could never have... Using my shame against me... My ill advised infatuation with her... A mage, of all things."

"You are a mage and I, a templar. It is my duty to oppose you and all you are."

"Only mages have that much power at their fingertips. Only mages are so susceptible to the infernal whisperings of the demon."

The door to the Ambassador's office opened. Both she and Mother Giselle turned toward the newcomers before latter was distracted by a refugee asking for a blessing. (As if her thoughts had called for him,) Cullen emerged with some folders tucked under an arm, smiling as he greeted her; Lady Montilyet followed. Dressed in bold colors and fine silks, the woman did not fit in with the overall worn and hardened atmosphere of Haven - there was an air about her of faint nobility,
diplomatic nobility, and something that brought back to mind a younger, more innocent Leliana. "Ah, the Herald of Andraste," she carried a bundle of letters and an oddly shaped, hefty package, "Two Grey Warden related messages arrived hours ago."

Amell's eyes flickered over to meet hers, "If any of them are a missive from Weisshaupt, kindly burn them," she advised only half-jokingly, tucking a stray strand of hair behind an ear.

That remark earned her a soft gasp, a hand to cover a mouth dropped open, and widening eyes. As small as the reaction was, curious bystanders stopped their conversations to gaze over in the group's direction; Chancellor Roderick turned from his conversation with two civilians to convey a look of abhorrence. "The Grey Warden Headquarters?" Lady Josephine clarified after quickly regaining her composure, hands tightening over her clipboard, "Herald... Warden-Commander Amell. You can't possibly-"

"I assure you: they are a useless lot, all of them up in the Anderfels," Rubbing her temples at her pounding headache from the voices of the Calling, Amell could not stop her hands from shaking over the pain. "I understand their reluctance to interfere in the Mage-Templar war, but ignoring all of my pleas for assistance when the Calling started?" Unforgivable. Her eyes narrowed as she stared off into space, recalling late nights of frantically writing inquiries to her own leaders, begging for help and realizing that none would come, all the while her people continued to walk to the Deep Roads to meet their end.

"But," the Ambassador faintly protested, "they are your superiors." Amell sighed; unreasonable behavior was not going to win her any favors here. She was never a diplomatic person; anyone who talked to her for at least five minutes would come to that conclusion. She was more inclined towards a show of force, extensive blackmail, and persuasion skills - essentially how she stopped the Fifth Blight. Nobody knew why she held such resentment towards Weisshaupt. In fact, to a certain extent, it wasn't even their fault, it was that of the thrice damned Sloth Demon of Kinloch Hold who chose to trap her in a Fade version of Weisshaupt, its false majesty that grated on her as she stayed, feeling time slipping past her fingertips like water. That nightmare soured all opinions toward the fortress.

"Commanders of the Grey have some amount of autonomy in their rule over their respective regions. Some more than others," Amell ran a distracted hand through her hair, "Weisshaupt has a lot to answer for and I can guarantee you that no one is happy with them." A small smile, bitter and grim, danced at the edge of her mouth, "If the Breach had not happened, I would've eventually made my way up to them to force their hand." She looked back down and smiled ruefully, "such as they are, it seems that solving your problem would also solve my own."

Cullen crossed his arms, "The Inquisition doesn't have the resources to send men north, but we have forwarded messages through Sister Nightingale's ravens. She is certain that they have reached the wardens there though the ravens return empty handed." Amell shifted in her spot, drawing a circle in the ground with her shoe: Cullen is standing... Very close. He wasn't touching her anymore, but she could feel the heat emanating from him, warming her side. Or maybe it was her hyper-awareness of his presence (and only his presence) and she herself was feeling hot due to her own body's reactions?

"Doesn't mean that they couldn't be intercepted by someone in the organization," Lady Montilyet added, making a flourish as she jotted down a note on a blank piece of vellum. "The wardens, though a highly respected group, do not share their secrets and they come across a bit... Enigmatic." She offered an apologetic look as she struggled to find the proper adjective, "However, some of my contacts have been whispering about, like what the Herald has hinted, a degree of infighting." She handed over two neatly folded letters, "These, fortunately, are not from the Anderfels."

The mage warden smoothed out the first dispatch, picking off the melted wax from the corners, as
she read. The first one had her make a wry face, "Likewise, kindly also burn any that you get from Warden-Commander Clarel of Orlais... It's not out of disrespect" she hastily added at Lady Montilyet's scandalized face, "She's been requesting me to lend some Ferelden warden for her own purpose but I've always declined since she wouldn't tell me why she wanted them. She claims that it's to stop the out of control Calling, but..." She paused, letting the back of her head hit the column as she sighed. The light from the Ambassador's candle flickered a sharp profile on all surfaces, projecting a surreal air towards the architecture of the Chantry.

After making a noise of comprehension, Cullen addressed Lady Montilyet who looked intrigued when Amell clearly couldn't bother explaining further, "It would make sense to decline the offer, Ambassador. Warden-Commander Clarel didn't state why she needed the Ferelden warden and why you couldn't do it yourself without needing her. No one would risk doing that to help a stranger and it would also make sense not to continue communications as she is also," he raised an eyebrow as he scanned the writing, "raving mad. Maker's Breath, I can barely follow her thought processes."

"Callings make you like that: disjointed and illogical," Amell reflected as as she broke the wax seal of the second letter; she immediately brightened, "Oh, this is much better. Dear Nathaniel, one of my first recruits, wrote back," she grinned as she traced over the dried ink on the parchment, slightly crumpled at the edges, impeccable handwriting, yellowing on one side due to the harsh elements that it had endured in it's journey to Haven. The voice in the letter sounded incredibly flat and long suffering, but tinted with affection.

To the Inquisition:

I understand that my Commander has once again gotten herself embroiled in a vital world saving quest or another as she is wont to do. Please give her my and all of her warden's best wishes and relief. We are safe here at Soldier's Peak - Avernus's presence and his experimental barrier against the Calling is off-putting but given time, we will be used to him just as we will be used to his decidedly amoral leanings.

I would like to warn my Commander's advisors of some her quirks, however, specifically her tendency to wander off and return with some unusual object or person - they are all invaluable despite initial appearances. To put it simply, more than half of the grey warden that she had personally recruited have tried to kill her at one point or another and having Joined, they are our best and most loyal men and women on the field. But I digress.

"Which would explain the sudden influx of your inner circle: Iron Bull, Sera, and Vivienne were unexpected but welcomed additions," Lady Montilyet murmured as she placed the wrapped package in Amell's hands, "individuals that I would not have thought were capable of being successfully recruited."

"It's not that hard," the mage warden argued, "to find companions. No one likes to be alone. No one of the Inquisition has tried to kill me; Cassandra has tried arresting me, but that isn't attempted murder." That remark earned her a sniff and an incredulous look - apparently, she had completely missed the point. Cullen, trying to stifle his laughter behind his gloved hand, deigned to comment.

Due to obvious reasons, I cannot in good faith send our Ferelden wardens over to add to your manpower. But I have included two swords that I hope will be of some use to your organization.
Curious, Amell delicately unwrapped the bundle and gasped in delight as the candlelight offered a sharp contrast of gleaming metal gleaming gold with the shine of well-polished volcanic aurum. Two greatswords: one asymmetric and the other symmetric in design. Both seemed to hum with the love from their blacksmith and untold amount of days spent in their creation. "He actually sent them," Amell whispered in reverence, tracing the sharp edges with a finger, not flinching as she accidentally drew blood. Quickly pressing her lips over the bleeding area, she set the asymmetric sword aside and pulled the other from its scabbard, allowing light to catch on its blade, a streak of white, "Vigilance and... Cullen... Ahh, Commander, would any of your men have need for Dragonbrand? It would be a pity to hold it in storage as a spare."

The man accepted the offered greatsword, Dragonbrand, in his hands, took a few steps back, and gave it a few experimental swings, smoothly moving from one stance to another. Lady Montilyet's hand jumped to her chest as she quickly retreated to Amell's other side and nearby witnesses looked on admiringly as the sword whistled as it arced. The controlled power behind his swings were a result of a lifetime of practice, honed into his muscles. He tested its balance and hold and, after a minute or two, with a pleased noise, suggested, "Hand it to your qunari mercenary. He would appreciate it's dragon-slaying capabilities," he pressed the blade back into her waiting hands, his fingers brushing over hers.

And therein lies the crux of the problem.

Every touch from him, though it seemed unintentional, felt a second too long, felt like caresses, felt hot on sensitive skin. He couldn't possibly be doing this on purpose, is he? Amell looked down at her reflection on Dragonbrand's metallic surface, her own face slightly red in the dim light as her blush slowly moved up to her tattoos. She shifted the grip on the handle: she saw Cullen's reflection staring off to the side as he cleared his throat.

Cullen is... different. He acts differently around her. At first glance, it seemed like their relationship had reverted back to the past before she was conscripted by Duncan. These days, long nights were spent together hovering over the war table, between trying to decide how to best allocate resources to various parts of the continent, they idly chatted about various topics: his experiences in Kirkwall, hers in Amaranthine, discussing the good and bad leadership qualities that one can possess and, whimsically, the golem that used to stand in the middle of the town square of Honnleath. At second glance, their relationship had taken a turn to the path less trodden and leading to... nothing more than an infatuation.

Small touches and small looks that make her feel all sorts of things: pretty, wanted, desired, needed... Amell rubbed her sternum - it ached.

"Herald?" She startled from her thoughts and turned towards the source of the voice. Cullen had made an excuse to go relieve his soldiers from Cassandra's loving training exercises. Lady Montilyet held her clipboard close to her chest, her eyes lingered at the opened double doors, "If I may be bold enough to ask, how did you and Commander Cullen first meet? I understand that you were both in the Ferelden Circle tower but usually mage-templar relations are poor regardless of proximity." A cold wind blew in bits of snow past the threshold: they danced in the air till they melted on the stone floor.

Amell tilted her head as she looked at the woman in amusement. Really, was Cullen more tight-lipped than she was? She used to be able to effortlessly wheedle the templar patrol schedules out of him. "I got caught trying to smuggle a friend of mine who was an apprentice to meet with his lover who was a senior mage. My punishment was five days in a cell and he was my guard. I started
talking to him after the first hour."

In the following silence, she counted to eight before the Ambassador dryly accused without, impressively, loosing any of her poise, "You do know that I can tell when you lie, Herald." Amell laughed, linking arms with Lady Montilyet as she cajoled the noble woman to step outside for some fresh air.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Those who had been cast down,
The demons who would be gods,
Began to whisper to men from their tombs within the earth.
And the men of Tevinter heard and raised altars
To the pretender-gods once more,
And in return were given, **IN HUSHED WHISPERS,**
The secrets of darkest magic.

-Threnodies 5:11

Amell

Becoming a grey warden does not suddenly infuse the recruit with fighting prowess, nor does the organization hold any code of honor as Blackwall wished to believe. There was a reason why wardens in general did not complain when their accomplishments in history are repeatedly forgotten and viewed with a sense of mob apathy and it was not just because the commanders tended to recruit the criminals, the outsiders, and the eccentrics. When the world forgets their deeds, less eyes judge their choices - their typically amoral, grey choices. There is no burden of responsibility to uphold values of the common people; it makes their work easier when the endgame is the prevention of another Blight. All the men and women part of the group, each a little twisted inside, are bonded by a sacrifice that lasts thirty years.

Years ago when her group was on the road between civilizations, ambushed on a seemingly daily basis by the hoards of genlocks, hurlocks, and, if they were not lucky, an ogre or two, she used to quip, “All roads lead to darkspawn,” a staff in hand when the telltale signs of goosebumps and chills erupt down her spine.

“Untrue,” Alistair used to amend after altercations as he wiped the gore off of his sword using looted pieces of cloth, “All roads lead away from darkspawn,” referring to the surrounding villages, sacked, and empty of people who had long fled.

Here is the question one should ask: while the sacrifice bonds wardens together to each other and their duty, do they ever extend further to the people that they’re trying to save? As the organization keeps their secrets and grows more insular, with no one as a reliable moral compass, how skewed are their perceptions of the world to the point that they think that the ramifications of raising a demon army is acceptable to the losses of their fellow men in order to eradicate all future Blights and stop the false Calling?

Amell stared at the letter that had passed through so many hands that the edges were weathered thin. Scout Harding had reported that the parchment had slipped into the pocket of one of the less experienced members of her reconnaissance team somewhere between Halamshiral and Crestwood. (Leliana was not entirely pleased.) Amell had been skeptical of the veracity of the words but she knew the writer, Jean-Marc Stroud, from accidental encounters on her own travels to get a feel for his handwriting and his voice. Unlike Amell who travels due to constant wanderlust, the senior
warden tended to travel to the corners of Thedas to avoid being trapped by the Great Game. And now, it seemed that he was on the run from his own people.

Resisting the urge to rub her face, she kicked at the snow drifts, feeling the mark of the rift crackling in her left palm, emitting green light into the darkness despite her hands being bandaged. Dog ran past her legs, sights set on a wild nug in the distance. As the snowfall eventually drowned out Dog’s happy barks, she sought shelter in a nearby hut where she had found Adan’s lyrium potion recipe, feeling neither the inclination nor the energy to stop by the tavern or head back to her bed. The sun had set hours ago; she contemplated the pros and cons of staying here for the night. On one hand, the entirety of Haven would flip if they found her missing in the morning. On the other hand, if she woke up early enough, she could sneak back later with no one the wiser.

She was loosing time: fatigue, days of restless sleep, a haze around her mind. A simple walk around the town outskirts to clear her mind had turned into a massive trek that had eaten up her afternoon and evening. She glanced at the letter in her hand and crumpled it, “Wardens on the coast... Wardens in Orlais... Warden Commander Clarel...” She collapsed onto the single chair in the room, drained. Stroud had informed her that this notice was his third: he had sent out ten copies to ten different trusted men and women. Communication was highly unreliable and he did not dare to disclose his location for fear of being discovered.

“My protests have earned me the enmity of my peers, even those who I have personally recruited and trained. It is a heartbreaking thought to think that our corruption in the ranks have driven us to do these unspeakable deeds and turn on our fellow men,” Stroud’s plea for help was desperate - she wondered how closely he was hounded, “Warden-Commander Amell: you strike me as someone who still have that bit of empathy within her. I wish for understanding. I cannot be the only one to think that this is madness.” He could not even flee to her position due to the inherent risks - he could only give a one-way warning. “I have a plan in place - for the time being, do not worry about me.”

She rested her elbows on the desk, pressing her palms to her eyes. Senior Warden Stroud was a good man and did not deserve the fate of a wanted man. Warden-Commander Clarel’s rambling messages had stopped a week ago - she must’ve known. But according to her three advisors, there had been no overt threats or attacks on the Inquisition since then. Clarel must be biding her time... Or summoning demons.

Had Amell been in any other position, she would’ve dropped everything and led a one-man rescue mission to haul Stroud from whatever miserable cave he was cooped up in. But the responsibilities of the Inquisition held her back. “Priorities. Do not do anything radical until the Breach is sealed,” Leliana had pulled her aside when she had been making her rounds, “Seal the Breach and we’ll negotiate on setting aside time for personal quests. If you must need men, send out Blackwall.”

That would’ve been a grand idea... If it wasn’t for the fact that Blackwall isn’t a grey warden. Amell’s forehead hit the desk; the subsequent dull sound of contact did not ease her nerves.

Initially, hearing that there was a warden constable nearby and meeting the man himself had her almost hugging him out of sheer joy. She had been looking forward to the camaraderie that comes with being a part of something greater. She wanted someone who understands. Blackwall seemed to have all of that and more - he resisted the Calling, he wasn’t under Warden-Commander Clarel’s influence, and he was a talented warrior. But given a couple days of thought and endless questions and vague answers, her excitement turned into doubt, finally culminating into a confession earlier this afternoon that she was still not sure how to handle.

Amell shelved the small voice inside her mind suggesting that he should undergo the Joining since he already romanticized the organization to the extent that he had: that was an idea to be toyed with at a
later date - a much, much later date. It was not as if the rest of her companions weren’t hiding something. “You learn this from the Ben-Hassrath” Iron Bull had swept an arm to encompass the entirety of Haven’s outer walls, “It’s tragedies. If it’s not tragedies, it’s secrets. If it’s not secrets, then its burdens. Everyone of your people has them. Except for that elf, Sera, but she’s a bit of a special case.” The qunari had tapped the side of his nose with a finger, “Don’t worry, Boss. You’ll eventually learn to read the little tells.”

“You didn’t kill the real Blackwall, did you?” She had asked, cornering him in the corner of the smithy, right hand twitching, ready to shoot out the most lethal spell she knew if he dared to do anything other than answer her question. You aren’t colluding against the wardens, are you? You aren’t conspiring against the Inquisition, are you?

The man did his best not to act the part of said cornered animal - her approval of him incrementally increased. “No,” still, he looked nervous due to their public spot and private conversation - a bad combination if not for the fact that Harrit’s men at the fire can drown out even the roars of a druffalo. “But he had planned to conscript me.” She drew closer, gaze lingering on his eyes, his body language, trying to gauge his worth. She had tilted her head to the right. “Why is that?” Blackwall, or whatever his name is, doesn’t strike one as a criminal... Was he an outsider? Mildly eccentric? He did roam the Hinterlands alone as a proclaimed recruiter, taking pride in his isolation and how he did the thankless jobs of helping the common man. It seemed rather contrived.

“Because he saw something in me. And for that, I’ll take up his name, honor his death, and discard my shameful past,” his hands clenched at his side, his voice lowered and a bit of the Markham accent peeked through his speech. He was reliving some unpleasant memories, eyes glazed into some far away space, pupils dilated due to their dark surroundings. She waited patiently for him to resurface back to the present.

Blackwall wasn’t a far cry from her own Ferelden Wardens in terms of tragic pasts - Sigrun was by all accounts legally dead. However, as much as he was a champion, he was a coward, and it takes time, sometimes years, to rid oneself of the coward. “Your resolve won’t make it go away,” she remarked, offering one of her rare bits of wisdom. Behind her, she could hear a workmen beating away at a standard issued sword and then the telling hiss of red hot metal drenched in water.

He straightened and bowed, an arm across his chest, and solemnly concluded, “I will wait for it. Till then, I’ll put my talents to good use, Herald... Commander of the Grey.” He had taken her statement to mean that she wasn’t kicking him out into the cold - and she wasn’t going to - but he was completely missing the point. Shaking her head, she turned on her heels to ruminate on the new information.

“Amell?” She jerked up from her position sprawled halfway over the desk and turned around to the voice, brushing hair away from her face. She pushed back her chair and stood, rubbing her eyes as she struggled to regain her bearings. Cullen’s silhouette took up most of the open doorway, black against black, with the skies above him in that ethereal shade of green. With a solid grip on her shoulder, he gently pulled her forward, “Cassandra is searching for you. Were you sleeping here?”

“I---” she yawned into a knuckle and rubbed her stiff neck, “I think I was. I meant to.” Walking to the door, she glanced outside, shivering as the windchill brushed against her skin. The Breach swirled high above, blocking out the starlight. His hands were tracing the impressions on her face that she had gotten from the uneven surface of the table. “Must I go back now?” She plaintively asked, unmoving as his thumb continued to brush against her facial markings. He didn’t answer.
Conceding to his unspoken demands, she let her head rest on his armor, “I didn’t think that anyone would find me,” She mumbled as a hand slipped under her back and her legs and lifted her into the air.

“I know,” he said simply, adjusting his hold on her, “that you tend to equate distance with solace.” She buried her face in the warm fabric and hummed softly. He walked around the frozen lake, the rhythm of his boots crunching against the snow soothing enough for her to stay in that in-between state of wakefulness and sleep. Haven was peaceful tonight - many had opted to stay with families instead of participating in revelries among friends. The shadow of a ram darted in the trees, fleet footed, sure footed...

She drifted off for an unknown amount of time. The whispers came, urging her to move underground and head for the Deep Roads. The voice in the Breach again demanded a sacrifice. Divine Jusitinia again begged her to warn the people. The howls of a wolf grew closer. In the Fade lurked a demon of colossal mass, of multiple elongated limbs, of a mouth of teeth and a face with no eyes. Little creatures crawled at its feet, scurrying up a cliff, scurrying towards an open fade rift. She heard the roar of a dragon calling for its master.

“Is your Calling getting stronger?” Cullen later asked her at the steps of her cabin. “You were restless.” The cold from the snow was beginning to seep through her boots and to her feet. A part of her wished to huddle in the heat of the fireplace; a part of her wished to move closer to Cullen and his own emanating warmth. But her faculties were beginning to return to her and the more she awoken from her half-sleep the more she remembered how she allowed him to carry her in...

Maker have mercy: hopefully the shroud of darkness hid the blush that had spread across her cheeks. She carded a hand through her hair, “Only when I sleep,” she admitted after a few seconds of heavy silence, “It’s nightmares, mostly. I only get headaches when I’m awake.”

“Amell,” he stepped closer. She looked up and then averted her gaze. The door was behind her - at any moment, she could walk through and pretend that this never happened. But she stayed. (Why did she stay? Did she really want this?)

“Yes,” she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The aborted movement to reach out and cup his face turned into an awkward pat on his shoulder. She let the hand rest there, curling her fingers into the feathers of his pauldrons. “They are getting stronger. It’s fine; I’m handling it. You...” she blinked as it occurred to her that, “Cassandra wasn’t looking for me, was she? You shouldn’t worry too much.”

He laughed, soft and mirthless, “I can’t help it. Amell,” he whispered. “You know why I care.” She could feel his presence lingering close, his eyes pinning her down, his words seeping into her skin. If she tilted her head back... and he leaned down that last inch, he could...

“Commander?” Amell nearly jumped out of her skin in fright. Cullen shifted head rest against the crook of her neck and growled, his breath tickling her collarbone. From the beaten path, a soldier had appeared with a massive stack of files, unaware of the tension forming around the man. “I have papers from Sister Nighting---” The soldier looked up and faltered, “I’m sorry. Did I interrupt...?” Feeling hot and lightheaded, Amell muttered excuses to duck into her cabin, slipping through the door and closing it just as she saw Cullen turning around to confront the terrified soldier.

Well. She felt her forehead and sat (collapsed) onto her bed. Her mind was a mess; her heart even more so. She knew what Cullen wanted. Cullen knew that she wouldn’t run, at least not until her embarrassment overcame her senses. In the morning - sometime in the future, between the duties of the Inquisition, maybe they will revisit what they had. Sighing at the memory of his heated gaze and of his touches (small, heavy, hungry), she closed her eyes and willed herself a dreamless sleep.
Hours later, Amell woke up on her bed in her cottage to the singing of warblers and the rising sun; unsure whether she had dreamed that entire encounter. There was an unopened note sitting innocently on her desk that she had missed in the night, next to the autographed Hard in Hightown series that Varric had gifted to her a couple days prior.

“Cousin,” the note said, writing decorated with ink blots and blood spray, “If you are still searching for leads of Senior Warden Janeka, I suggest you ask Varric for the story of Warden-Commander Larius and a darkspawn named Corypheus. I am making my way to your Inquisition and am in a bit of a quandary. Not to worry: the blood is not mine. Rescue missions are tricky like that and of course Senior Warden Stroud has to hide in the most inaccessible cave in Thedas. It’s a bit hard to sit and write when all your daily spiders have turned into corrupted spiders by the red lyrium. Where did all the bears come from? I don’t remember Ferelden having this many bears. - Hawke.”

Iron Bull

A white sun surrounded by white clouds, immediately shaded by the silhouette of three people when he groaned and squinted, “He’s awake and lives to fight another day!” Varric announced on his left, peering at him critically, “How many fingers am I holding up?” His horns felt like someone had taken a razor and shaved them down till they drew blood at the quick. The scent of burnt hair wafted into his nose; he coughed out a small cloud of smoke and winced as all of his nerves from the neck down screamed.

“Thank the Maker, we don’t have to carry him,” Boss muttered as she began rummaging in her pack, listening for the tell-tale clink of glass hitting glass. Iron Bull stiffly accepted the proffered vial of elfroot potion and chugged it down like ale. Immediately, open gashes began to close, bruises disappeared as the familiar warmth slowly mended his broken bones. She clasped her hands together as he gingerly sat up, “Congratulations Bull, on delivering the killing blow to the Dragon of the Hinterlands and then knocking yourself out when said High Dragon collapsed onto you.” He braced himself on a hand and knee and waved away Blackwall’s offer to haul him up and instead reached for Dragonbrand, still in one piece if not a bit scorched around the pommel. “There’s a nasty bump on your head,” she cocked her head to the side and raised a hand in a silent offer to use a healing spell, “Do you remember the fight?”

“It’s slowly coming back, Boss,” he grunted, rubbing his throat and reaching for his waterskin. He waited for the tendrils of light pouring from her hand to gently dim and for his headache to disappear before taking a long draught. “We’re going to do this again, aren’t we?” he asked with a grin, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Just because I fainted doesn’t mean that I’m not raring to have another go at another dragon.” While he got duo looks of shock and mild horror from his companions, the boss slyly winked at him. Chuckling, he offered her a small nod in acknowledgment: it was good to know that the Herald was as crazy, if not more, than he.

“Andraste have mercy,” having not seen their exchange, the dwarf groaned, ripping off the edges of his tattered sleeves and throwing them to the ground, “I swore to myself back in Kirkwall’s Bone Pit that no more: Varric Tethras is not going to fight another one of those beasts if he could get away with it. Another dragon down and Tiny wants to look for more.” He leaned over, hands on knees, still regaining his stamina and breath, and uncorked a vial of healing potion.

“You only have two under your belt. Stop whining,” Boss laughed as she threw a bundle of gauze at the rogue’s feet, “Wait till you get to five.” She wasn’t bothered by Varric’s gripe. In fact, she glowed with the post-adrenalin rush and the more he scowled the more she beamed in his direction, wearing her own scrapes and bruises like stylish accents on clothing, though the smears of blood
running down the corner of her mouth gave her the impression of a wild animal.

“This is the fifth dragon you’ve slain,” Blackwall clarified with an undertone of incredulity. Iron Bull made a happy sound at the back of his throat that had him descend into another coughing fit. Scout Harding emerged from the grotto where she had been critically observing the battle and stopped a few paces away from them to survey the carnage. With a blow from her horn, more scouts arrived from the nearby Inquisition camp with an armful of equipment to dismantle and salvage the bodies of the dragon and dragonlings. Many stopped in their tracks to gap at the bloody scene.

Boss flipped her hair back and retied it with her collection of string and ribbons, “It’s not as impressive as you’d think. Cassandra stopped four dragons from eating Divine Beatrix III. The Hero of Orlais, the Right Hand of the Divine - where did you think she got those titles? Anyways, depending on how you look at it, it’s more like four and a half, seeing that my second dragon that I thought had died recently visited me, turned into Flemeth, praised me on a job well done, then turned back into a dragon, and went on her merry way.” She picked up her greatsword (comically too big for her size and stature) from the grass, deftly wiped the blood off with a piece of cloth, and frowned when the red streaks refused to come away. Though she was unsatisfied, she still proceeded to tie the weapon to her back.

Varric had meanwhile choked mid-swallow, “Wait, did you just say, ‘Flemeth?’ You killed the Witch of the Wilds?” At her absently given nod of assent, he stared down at his vial with intent, as if his own will power would change it to the strongest liquor Thedas had to offer, “that explains so much.” Amell glanced up, raising an eyebrow at the non sequitur.

Fortunately, years of training in the Ben-Hassrath has enabled him to move through the puzzles of people with ease. With all the research he had done on his fellow fighters of the Inquisition and of the Herald, it did not take him long to connect the dots that the boss had missed. Seeker Cassandra had once expressed her frustration at the fact that the world does not operate on happenstances any longer - connections between men and women of importance that people would not have initially guessed are pushing the world into change. In his more spiritual, perceptive, drunken moments, Iron Bull can admit that yes, change was happening (- greater change to those who ride the coattails of the destined and fated heroes). The Qun does not put weight on any of the legends south of Seheron, but in times of weakness, when the Orlesian debaucheries had died down to their respective pockets of festivities, he wondered.

“You might want to open Tale of the Champion when we get back to Haven.” Iron Bull placed a hand on her shoulder when her expression turned into one of confused bewilderment. “Read it front to back, not just the ending. It would explain why your second dragon came back from the dead.”

“I’ll tell the story to you myself later, over drinks when we aren’t stinking in guts and gore,” Varric sighed, tucking his favored crossbow back into its holder and rolled his shoulders. “Maker’s balls. You cannot make this shit up,” he mumbled though everyone could clearly hear him as he made his way, a faint limp and favoring his right side, back to camp.

She rubbed two grimy fingers together, making a pained expression of disgust as dried blood smeared with fresh blood. After a few seconds of gathering his gear, Blackwall followed Varric back to camp to restock on his inventory of potions. She gave his retreating figure a considering look, varying visible emotions ranging from suspicion to curiosity. The news of Blackwall’s mistaken identity had spread no further than the Herald’s closest contacts. Speculation on his past history had only invited cloudy answers - despite his upfront personality, he was very good at hiding. But he was an ardent warrior. If bonds of brotherhood are not built upon words, they are at the very least formed slowly in blood.
Iron Bull breathed deeply and allowed himself some time to bask in the afternoon sun. Clashes of steel and magic echoed off the mountains in the Hinterlands; the mage-templar war was vast and endless. Redcliffe sat in the northeast, gates barred shut from anyone who was not an apostate seeking asylum. He closed his eyes. A momentary vision flashed past his memory: the back of a raging dragon, thick plumes of smoke suffocating and causing his eyes to water, grip via thighs tightening as he was swung side to side, as he raised his sword with both hands and plunged into its crest. He could still hear its screams.

“Bull?” He opened his eyes. She had craned her neck back to stare questioningly at him, “You following?”

“Right behind you, Boss.” Satisfied, she turned around and jogged back up the steppe caverns. Another vision pushed its way to the forefront of his mind: her back facing him, sprinting towards the High Dragon, left hand wielding fire, right hand wielding ice, and a thick miasma of power pouring from her body. “You know,” he began conversationally, “if I was anymore truthful in my reports to Seheron, they might order me to convert you into the Qun.”

“They can try,” she slowed her pace till he caught up to her side and blinked twice, “You know,” she parroted, with a reflective tone, “I had a friend, Sten, well, Arishok now, who told me the same. I told him that me joining the Qun was as likely as him becoming a Ferelden warden.” Her inquiring stare reminded him of the assessing gaze she had given him when she had first met him and his chargers, pants worn from sliding down the cliff side of the Storm Coast.

Krem had good things to say about her; but it took seeing her to be struck by how young she still was (younger than him, younger than the people at her side). Barely entering adulthood when she stopped the Blight, barely resting after her first set of heroics before rebuilding the Ferelden Wardens from nothing but an abandoned keep - word traveled fast, whispered with a tint of fear. But she wasn’t her titles, in fact... She would be more receptive to the odd quirk than staunch mannerisms. With this in mind, he had bowed with his good-will and respect paid for someone of her position, an arm over the chest and promised with a small tilt in the corner of his mouth, “Whenever you need an ass kicked, whenever you’re getting your ass kicked, The Iron Bull is with you.”

He was not wrong. She had laughed and poked him in his midsection, “You,” she declared, trying to speak through her mirth, “I like you.”

She knelt down to pluck a royal elfroot, smelling it to test its quality, “We’re still on good terms due to a mutually beneficial trade of scented candles and baked goods. Apparently, you don’t have cookies in Par Vollen.” An easy grin stretched across her face, headless of the small cuts littering her visage.

At the camp, people bustled about in frantic movements, gathering firewood, repairing equipment, fulfilling requisitions, and healing the wounded. Boss’s attention was called by Lead Scout Harding and they began to discuss further plans of movement for the Inquisition troops. They wandered to the side, seeking the shade of a nearby tree. Varric, having been tended to, sported an impressive band aid clearly slapped hastily on his cheek - but he looked more refreshed than he had before standing in knee deep amounts of slaughtered dragon. The dwarf side-eyed him, “If you keep salivating like that, you might get into a bit of trouble. Curly wouldn’t appreciate you fawning over her.”

It wasn’t quite salivating, it was more like minor hero worship. Regardless, Iron Bull snorted, “If he is that upset, then the Commander should fight harder.”
Leliana’s clothes still smelt faintly of the candles from her vigils that she partakes in every time the news of a scout’s death reached her. “Honor the sacrifices,” Amell had said when she first suggested what would become almost a nightly ritual, “No man or woman is expendable. Become the person that they see, embrace the qualities that inspired them to follow you.” She had an armful of blood-red simple make, wax and wicks, sold wholesale at the Chantry that she claimed were used whenever a mage failed their Harrowing. “Or you can bathe in the blood of your enemies,” She had shrugged then cursed when a candle slipped her hold and rolled onto the ground, “I might be selfish. The Inquisition might see you as Sister Nightingale, but you’re always Leliana to me.” So the Seneschal, Spymaster, Advisor, Bard, Archer, and Left Hand of the Divine continued her rites, if for nothing but a peace of mind and a practice to fall back on in hard times.

She had barely finished her prayers and farewells before she was being called to the war council. En route, she was given a hefty dossier on the situation at the arling. “It’s pretty terrible,” Amell warned as they walked side by side through the Chantry doors, “half of the inhabitants there are reluctant rebels. All of them have suffered from the war. It’s more of a refugee camp than a sanctuary. And... Well, you’re reading the more complicated bits.”

“We’ve already agreed to reach out to the mages and I am not going to change my mind,” Leliana reaffirmed as she flipped through the pile, eyes locking on keywords such as Tevinter Imperium and indentured servitude. “You need to distribute the magic in the area when you close the Breach. I will not have you risking your life without conduits.”

“I’m not going to blow up, Leliana,” Amell assured her. “If I do, I’ll be sure to aim far from your shoes.”

The glare that she got for that quip was scathing, “Don’t joke...” A beat: the spymaster sighed, “Wait, of course you would. You didn’t stop your black humor even the night before the the Battle of Denerim.” Vivienne momentarily stopped her work at her table to glance up at them; Mother Giselle inclined her head in a greeting. High in the alcove, her ravens flew from perch to perch, staring down at the people below them with inquisitive eyes. “As long as you know what we are dealing with in Redcliffe and the ramifications of Grand Enchanter Fiona’s decisions...” she trailed off, “You wanted to discuss something about her?”

Amell tilted her head to the side in thought, “Ah, that. Yes, I did,” she leaned over, voice hushed, “I, er, want you to observe her” The spymaster raised an unimpressed eyebrow as Amell hurriedly gestured towards her face, “She looks familiar around the eyes. I have the strangest idea but,” she shrugged, “It would be better to hear your thoughts first. Just keep it in mind - it’s not an emergency.”

Leliana pursed her lips, “Perhaps when all of this is over. Come, let us meet your new ally. I heard that he is quite the character,” she opened the door and beckoned Amell through, “What was his name again?”

“Dorian Pavus,” Amell said as she walked into the chamber, “of House Pavus,” waving in the direction of the man standing opposite of the war table, flanked by Commander Cullen and Seeker Cassandra. Lady Josephine sat off to the side outlining a letter to King Alistair. Leliana assessed the newcomer silently: tanned skin, groomed hair, clothing that looked outright impractical for anyone, even a mage (when armor schematics rely upon the type of runes threaded into the cloth instead of the physics and durability of the material, designs evolve in the way of fashion instead of reason, but even Dorian was an outlier in Tevinter tastes) with an impressive number of buckles holding down his pieces. While the Spymaster was giving the man a hard glare, Amell’s gaze contained
overwhelming curiosity - examining him more like a specimen than an actual person. Then again, Amell used to stare at Zevran the same way when he had just joined their group all those years ago so really she shouldn’t be surprised if this moment was going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. “He doesn’t look Tevinter,” Amell offered after nearly a minute of silence.

The man seemed to regain his composure with that comment, “Were you expecting a vision more monstrous? Elongated teeth and a set of horns perhaps.” He huffed, crossing his arms, looking fairly affronted.

“Sorry,” Amell looked mildly contrite as she crossed the room and peered over the map of the world, “the only people I’ve ever met from Tevinter were slavers who were kidnapping elves. They were an unpleasant group and, well, there wasn’t enough time to sit them down for tea and ask them about themselves.” Her fingers danced lightly over the map pieces, “Got some good gear from them,” she mumbled just loud enough for the Spymaster to hear. Leliana resisted the urge to do something childish like stamp on her toes or poke her ribs.

Dorian leaned over the table, frowning as he followed their path of reasoning, “And you believe that all the mages of the Thedas are unintentionally selling themselves into slavery,” he mused, propping his chin with a hand.

“You can’t deny that as a possibility,” Leliana pointed out with a cool tone, “I would put down saving the entire mage population from slavery as a high priority of the Inquisition. And the time magic that you said Magister Alexius used. He was purposely maneuvering around us, he wanted to reach the mages first.”

“So you will help,” Dorian concluded as he straightened. The tiniest bit of hope leaked through his tone.

“Against our better judgment,” the Seeker muttered, eyes narrowing into a baleful glare. The stark light from the small fires encased her in an even more intimidating air.

“Before we go any further, I want to clarify,” the Commander’s grip tightened on his sword, “Are we really comfortable with sending the Herald into Redcliffe? We all know that we are willingly springing Gereon Alexius’s trap by seeking negotiations with him,” he demanded, sweeping an arm over the war table, “Not to mention, that even if everything goes well and we secure their services, the amount of mages in Haven might cause a backlash onto the Herald when we seal the Breach.”

“It’s either not enough power or too much,” Amell countered, flicking her left wrist, revealing the layers of bandages around her hand that hid the mark from view, “Both options are quite horrible.” Closing her eyes and minutely relaxing her stance, Cassandra grudgingly agreed.

“Going to Redcliffe would let us learn more of this Venatori cult that Mage Pavus mentioned,” Josephine added. “Officially, they are not sanctioned in any capacity by the Tevinter Imperium, which limits our understanding of them.” She made a flourish with her feather and let her draft aside to allow the ink to dry, “If we learn more through exploiting Magister Alexius’s alliance, then we can further investigate who was responsible for opening the Breach.”

“I will come along,” as Dorian interjected, the Inquisition as a whole turned their heads in eerie synchronicity. Their actions did not deter him as he insisted, “I have insight into the magic that Alexius uses. You need me there.” Amell looked like she was considering the offer.

“No,” The Commander’s voice echoed strongly against the walls with its intensity, “If you think it’s that easy to trust you, you are very much mistaken.” Leliana mulled over Dorian’s offer, weighing the pros and cons. While he would be in close proximity to the Herald, he has pointed out the
deficiencies in their knowledge about their new opponent. His reasons for helping were made abundantly clear. Did the risks outweigh the benefits? She stared at Cullen until he met her eyes, blushed red, and turned away. For the Commander, probably not.

“We’ve closed a fade rift together. That is as good as exchanging drinks,” Amell laughed, tapping her fingers against the wood of the table. “However, Dorian Pavus” her eyes half-lidded, an unsettling smile spread across her features as she turned towards the man in question, “of House Pavus,” she added as an afterthought, “if you betray the Inquisition, I must warn you that Leliana eats Magisters for breakfast.” It was clear he didn’t know how to make of the threat. This time, Leliana did reach out to pinch her friend in the side. Amell jerked away but otherwise seemed unfazed.

Josephine hid her smile behind a closed fist and a polite cough, “Come then, let us plan.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Those who had been cast down,
The demons who would be gods,
Began to whisper to men from their tombs within the earth.
And the men of Tevinter heard and raised altars
To the pretender-gods once more,
And in return were given, IN HUSHED WHISPERS,
The secrets of darkest magic.

-Amell

Amell

It seemed as if every corner of Redcliffe Castle held a deposit of red lyrium, growing slowly through the walls, floors, ceilings, and its inhabitants. The winding corridors and the uneasy atmosphere reminded her of the times she navigated through the Deep Roads - madness around every corner, invisible fingers pulling at weakened sanity. Red lyrium touched everyone on a psychological level - not even a dwarf was immune. A mere touch caused her senses to warp: screams, war drums, and the high pitch hum of all the fade rifts in Thedas - the walls bent and swayed to their own rhythm. It's potency has increased since the last year... Since her present time that was now her past.

She supposed that she should feel astonishment for successfully, though against her will, time traveling: a bit of stupefaction mixed in with awe and that sort of open-mouthed, speechless wonder that comes from achieving the impossible. Instead, there was a minor shock that lasted a few seconds at most before she had to engage with the prison guards that attacked them on sight when Dorian and she emerged from the portal. Senior Enchanter Uldred, due to popular demand, had gone over the theory of time travel in his class one day, a lifetime ago, but he had mainly touched upon points of divergent timelines and paradoxes when one travels to the past. No one had thought to ask about the mechanics of jumping forward into the future. Apparently, the magisters of the Tevinter Imperium had.

She rubbed her head, her breath sharply increased as a long curl of pain touched at the base of her neck and extended upwards. The Calling: it was neigh unbearable. Flemeth's amulet was almost shaking from the power it was emanating to keep her from being possessed. Dorian, her one sane ally in this mess of events, with their rescued party members, had scouted ahead to see if he can spot the guards while she gingerly picked red lyrium shards from the bodies of dead spellbinders, hands bloody from rummaging through their torn pockets. In this state, she was as much as a liability as a needed variable against this mysterious Elder One - the taint within her sang a siren song.

Ripping off a piece of plaidweave from the spellbinder, she folded the shard within and rolled it tight. "I can hold that for you," Leliana offered. Wordlessly, Amell handed it over and watched the woman tuck it into her side pouch with trembling fingers. A year's worth of torture had sapped life from her body: a spell, a side effect, an unthinkable crime against humanity, bits of skin cut off, blood drawn until she looked like a skeleton dipped in wax - her ability to wield a bow came not from her physical dexterity but from her willpower to see that of all the outcomes the future held for the Inquisition, that
this was not one of them. "Do not look at me," she said without glancing up. Amell closed her eyes and turned around; the mark on her palm briefly flared.

It takes one year for the world to crumble through her fingers. It takes one year for Orlais to fall after the assassination of their Empress. It takes one year for the Elder One to conquer Thedas with a demon army. What horrors have you wrought, Warden-Commander Clarel? What of her own people at Soldier's Peak? Of the Inquisition? Of all the people that she held dear scattered across the land? Scant amounts of news filtered through the gossip channels of the Venatori in the form of overheard conversations, taunts, and abandoned notes: it was not enough.

Dorian returned in high spirits with a map containing marked places where he had spotted the tell-tale staff and tome of a spellbinder. Solas stood on his right, voice scratched from continuous apologies to someone he refused to name during his imprisonment. A few feet away, Sera hummed a distorted song, repeating the same eight notes again and again as she twirled on her toes; her eyes glowed from red lyrium exposure. "Up the stairs, down the hall... there are enough shards in this castle to open the door to the Throne Room," he paused to rub his eyes; they were a bit red, "that amulet of time magic would be on his person. I'm certain of it. Herald, if you may lead us..."

Amell allowed herself two seconds to give a shuddering breath to examine the three companions that had stayed in the timeline. She exchanged a knowing look with Dorian. The red lyrium ran through their systems like blood. If she failed again and stayed - they will die. This world was her first failure: this was her worst possible outcome. Taking the stairs down to the lower levels, her feet ate up ground, her sword dripped with blood - the rest dutifully followed. Walls (red red red) swept by in a dark blur. She feels...

("Hurry," Sera hissed as the group moves from the light of one fade torch to another, "He knows you're here. He's coming.")

Empty. Possibly from shock. A void grows within her that takes her breath, places doubts in her head, makes her fearful because it tastes of finality. So when they finally do find the Throne Room and witness the results of Felix's treatments, an empty shell suffering from a fate worse than dead, it is not willpower like that of Leliana's and of her companions' that drives her to battle, not fury, nor hate, but the knowledge in its absolute clarity that Gereon Alexius needs to die.

A dragon shook the foundations of the castle as it alighted on one of the watchtowers. She could imagine endless hoards of demons and darkspawn over the drawbridge, and in the midst of the army, one single entity whose presence was reminiscent of the Architect, the Elder One, stood tall. It sensed her mark and in return, the mark flared, once, twice, like a signaling beacon. She stumbled back, nearly tripping over Alexius's cooling body as pain continues to shoot through her skin, until Solas wrapped his fingers around her wrist and with a forceful push of his own magic, calmed the mark. On the top of the steps, Dorian levitated the amulet between open hands, a long incantation under his breath. The walls and ceilings shuddered so hard that dust fell from the high beams.

Sera's arms wrap around her middle; she squeezed for five seconds before jumping back, out of arms' reach. Solas traced her runic symbol with a delicate finger, "It was not meant to be like this," he murmured, words crawling out of his throat like black smoke, the double doors at the end of the hallway shake, "No one could've foreseen this on the day the Veil was torn. I vow that this day will not come." Backs straight, both elves walked out of her view. The next time she saw them, nearly an hour later, they were dead.

And Leliana, sweet Leliana who sang tales around the campfire, who preferred dancing shoes encrusted with jewels over dalish leather boots, hardened Leliana who no longer trusted the world to do right, who's arrows did not miss. It was Sister Nightingale who took aim, but before that, it was
Leliana who turned to give Amell a farewell kiss. A weathered, scarred cheek touched hers before skeleton, trembling hands pushed her towards the throne.

"Though darkness closes, I am shielded by flame. Andraste, guide me. Maker, take me to your side," murmured this version of Leliana, old, mutated, as she made her last stand, buying Dorian precious minutes to open a portal and pull them both through, just as a pack terror demons flanked the archer's side; a revenant surged forward, blocking the view of her death, and raised its sword...

Amell opened her mouth to scream but no sound came.

Suddenly, she was in the past, her present, her second chance, away from the horrific vision of what could be. The tapestries were not torn, the walls were clean of lyrium and blood, the torch lights were not dimmed by heavy, sacrificial blood magic. Amell slowly blinked and ran a hand through her hair. Gereon Alexius was on his knees at her feet, neck bare as if expecting an execution - of which she was so tempted to give and would have gladly done so if not for the sudden interruption by the king's retinue.

She briefly wondered what Alistair would make of the scene before him. Her sword was held an inch from Magister Alexius' vulnerable neck, his son hovered protectively over his right shoulder, Dorian had his staff faced in the direction of the Denerim soldiers, eyes wary and alert. Sera and Solas stood on either side of the columns with weapons drawn, fresh and ready to fight. Leliana emerged from the shadows at Fiona's left, executing a low bow to an old friend. Alistair offered an imperceptible nod before turning his rage towards the elven mage who was wringing her hands out of nerves. Trusting her legs to hold her, Amell sheathed her sword back into her scabbard and wandered over to her Spymaster who had her arms crossed, eyes flitting between King Alistair and Grand Enchanter Fiona with an increasingly disbelieving stare.

"-given Redcliffe Castle to a Tevinter Magister! You spat in the face of my generosity and turned over-"

Amell coughed and cleared her throat, "She's familiar around the eyes." The other woman hummed thoughtfully, tilting her head slightly.

"I see it too," Leliana's disbelief melted into the bemusement that comes when one hears the punchline of a grand comic joke, "Though I guess this means that I owe Zevran twenty sovereigns. Maybe more since we all teased him when he swore up and down Ferelden that he knew when someone had elven heritage." She smoothed down the creases in her front and approached the duo as their argument ended, "What do we do with her?" She motioned at Fiona.

"First, we tell her what an utter tit she is," she started, borrowing vocabulary from Sera's dictionary.

"Amell..."

Fiona watched her son storm away in disgust. It could be worse. In the future, she couldn't even move due to the crystal growing out of her, vibrating so quickly that it was hard to make out her outline among the glow. Amell coughed again, trying to expel the remaining red lyrium she had breathed in during her run through the future. Her fingers held a death grip around Flemeth's locket, no longer too hot to touch, no longer straining to keep the Calling at bay. She resolved to have her post-traumatic meltdown later, somewhere private, maybe in her cabin in the dead of night.

"Well!" Alistair strolled up to the pair, positively glowing in his royal attire. And to think that it took him years of training before he was comfortable in fine silks and cloth, "If it isn't my two favorite ladies in all of Thedas. The years doesn't seem to have touched either of you." He bent at the waist and brushed his lips over Leliana's offered hand, "Sister Nightingale."
"Don't sell yourself short. You are also looking well, King Alistair," she countered, amused.

Alistair waved away her compliment. "Compared to you, I'm a balding, swarthy, ugly man." He turned toward the other of the pair, "And Herald, that is what they are calling you, these days? Imagine my surprise when the news reached me that you gained another title. Actually, wait, I am not surprised," Amell didn't so much as step into his offered embrace as fall exhaustively into it, "I wish I can join you like old times but Anora would find me in three heartbeats and drag me back to the castle by the ear."

"As she should," Amell's muffled voice was barely heard as she had buried her head in his shoulder, thankful that no one was telling her how terrible she and Dorian looked compared to the rest of the Inquisition. Her eyes still contained that red tint, fainter now than before, but still there if one knew what to look for. Her armor and weapons were bloodied and with the initial roar in her blood dwindling down to a small candle flame, all the pains that she could've ignored before are demanding to be heard now. She might be limping.

Alistair released her and held her at arms length, eyeing her critically with a warrior eye before using his thumb to wipe away a blood stain at her temple. "Would the Inquisition need a small escort to Haven?" he offered. Humming, Amell locked eyes with Dorian across the chamber; he side-glanced at the scene of Felix trying to comfort his distraught father, gave a shrug, and winced when he pulled the skin of a barely healing wound.

"We would appreciate it," Amell gratefully replied.

**Dorian**

Before he disappeared, Felix expressed his heartfelt thanks and conveyed his plans to make the trek north back to the Tevinter Imperium. "One last trip before I die," he smiled, wane, pale, blighted, promising, "I'll spread the word of this Inquisition."

"Say only good things," Dorian looked around at the scenery of Haven, trying to imagine it as his new home for the foreseeable future, "I'll be staying here." At Felix's inquiring look, he elaborated, "My job is not yet done - there are still knowledge and talents that I can offer to the Herald." The areas of Venatori activity, for one, and also his research to see if there was any history in the Imperium of a magister named Corypheus.

"He was a darkspawn claiming to be a magister," she had dragged him into her small cabin, vellum sheets in disarray. They stood before a huge mural: a map of Thedas covered in cross-crossing strings, notes, pictures, scrawled messages and the likes. Measures and countermeasures, theories weaving a web of conspiracy so ridiculous that it might just be true. "A... source of mine claimed that he was killed a year ago. If his story is correct, then Corypheus might not be the only one out there with his specific skill set of powers..." Then, realizing her own lack of manners, she glanced awkwardly in his direction, "Err, forgive me. Would you like something to drink?"

"Anything hot," he had answered after a beat.

Some minutes of kicking aside scrolls, priceless tomes (he must ask to borrow them later, who knows what she had collected in her travels), and weaponry, she had guided him to a chair and offered him the choices of a variety of teas with warm milk, "How are you doing since," she had waved her left hand, bandaged though still leaking green, "the future?" On the bright side, he had acquainted himself with the rest of her inner circle with somewhat stellar results if his standard was that no one tried to outright kill
him when he made his introductions. He wondered if the Herald had a list of the types of people one would find in these lands: a circle mage, an apostate, a city elf, a surface dwarf, a qunari, a Seeker, on and on, and declared that she wanted one of each. But, of course, her question implied something different.

His most recent nightmares were seen through a red filter, a flash of a demon's claw here, the fires of a rage demon there, the oppressive atmosphere above him, and the feeling that he had blades dripping with Saar-qamek raked lightly over every inch of his skin. It only itched, at least until the madness overtook him. Then again, she looked as bad as he felt: circles under her eyes that were thankfully back to their normal non-red shade, voice still in that odd timber that came from red lyrium exposure. "Shouldn't I be the one asking you that?" he had lightly inquired.

She had leaned back in her chair, "We'll ask each other," she finally decided, "I've given my report to my advisors, but there's no way I would have anyone else suffer under the burden of how much this Inquisition means to the world." Moodily, she finished the last bit of her drink and set the cup aside, "We understand each other because we lived through it, somehow," she blinked, "with time magic." Her facial markings are stark against her hollowed cheeks. He had seen Sister Nightingale often dropped by with a plate of sandwiches at her doorstep, trying to encourage her to eat.

"A brotherhood between mages that only comes when they travel a year ahead into an apocalyptic future and lived to tell the tale." He took a moment to finish his own drink, "That is not something I expected to ever say in my life."

The Herald of Andraste... Amell had laughed, "No one would. Welcome to the Inquisition."

After saying farewell to the only other fellow Tevinter mage in all of Haven, he immediately headed back to his cabin that Lady Montilyet had given him and wavered at the threshold. His belongings, scattered across the table, contained valuable information on the inner workings of those cursed Venatori cultists. He briefly debated whether to offer them to the Spymaster or to the Commander.

On one hand, Commander Cullen was an ex-Templar and would recognize the threat of supremacist cult mages: his forces would be swift and brutal in their punishment. On the other hand, Commander Cullen was an ex-Templar and Dorian would rather not face his death at such an ironic end. On one hand, Commander Cullen didn't seem to have that prejudiced hatred against mages: at least there was none apparent when he worked alongside Amell. On the other hand, the qunari had staked a spot right next to the training grounds and Dorian would rather not poke that proverbial dragon until he was more assured of his own safety.

Still, obstacles were mere obstacles - they were placed there to be overcome: he steeled himself and shook out his arms before heading back out. If all else failed, he could still fade step out of any situation he deemed hostile. The air smelled of electricity. Storm clouds gathered in the distance; it will rain tonight. The soldier drills were ever endless, blades knocking against shields, war cries made that drowned out nearby conversations... Save for one loud argument by the tents.

Dorian, with a pile of documents tightly bounded twice by string and ribbon tucked under an arm, glanced towards the source of the noise ...and stopped in his tracks. What held him in his place was a combination of the bystander effect and of morbid curiosity. There was a saying back home that the circle mages of the south often behaved like bitter housewives. Watching the scene before him, he was inclined to agree.

Grand Enchanter Fiona and Madame Vivienne were at each others' throats shouting over one
another in a decisively undignified manner. "-danger to all of society! My dear, you must know that there is a reason why they fear our kind-" was drowned out by "-gilded cage. Living in Montsimmard is not the same as-" The most entertaining part of the picture was Amell who stood between them with an increasingly irritated expression, not joining in the squabble but pinching the bridge of her nose and taking deep breaths.

Some paces away, Seeker Cassandra continued her routine warm-ups with her sword and shield, but it was obvious that she was distracted and eventually gave up to move to the Commander's side under the pretenses of discussing regimen schedules. She observed the near brawl with a furrowed brow. "Is this about the decision between conscripting and allying with the mages?" She asked, "The Herald has already made her choice. Madame de la Fer can not change her mind now." The Commander grimaced, fingers resting on the pommel of his sword - but he had yet to move.

"-call out to the Chantry for protection. But the malcontents in the tower thought nothing of this-" "-living in fear and the knowledge that even the Maker does not see you as anything better than a bomb. There is a large voice of power in the Chantry that believes that it would be easier if we were all tranquil. Have you ever-"

"Enough," Amell finally snapped, voice cold as ice. Her command was not bolstered by magic, her volume was still low, but something in her tone threatened to freeze. Fiona took a step back; Vivienne held her ground, but she crossed her arms in a defensive maneuver. "Quiet. Both of you are wrong."

"The number of allied mages in Haven is making some of my men uneasy. It would be easier to monitor them if they were conscripted," Commander Cullen muttered, shaking his head. "Not to mention word of their once indentured status under a Tevinter Magister had spread among the other refugees before they even arrived. It does not bode well for future hopes of cooperation." He sighed, "However, I trust her judgment even if I had preferred other methods."

"-mess started from the fundamentals of a system set in place centuries ago. Don't argue with me on this, Madame Vivienne. It was inherently wrong. The rebellion was an inevitability the moment the Chantry utilized the Rite of Tranquility as a form of punishment because it takes only one person from high command to start using it excessively on his or her charges. If you want another war, if you want that same fear, then return to the status quo. If not, then something has to change." He had the impression that Amell rarely displayed passionate emotions, therefore such palpating anger from this distance was... intimidating. And yet, she did not shout or scream - scathing, yes, and barely contained.

Dorian strode forward and stopped when he reached the Commander's side, "Is it so strange to see mages fight?" He asked rhetorically as the man peered at him and gave a stiff greeting. "Though this is one step above a cat-fight. At least no one threw a gauntlet. Or a spell," he added as an afterthought. "For you, Commander," he offered his collection of documents, "Information on the Venatori. I would recommend five days and five nights to peruse it in its entirety. It's a monster."

Ignoring the exchange, Cassandra watched the altercation where Amell still wholly dominated with her low burning rage. "And you," the Herald turned towards the elven mage, words dripping with vitriol, "Don't think that I've forgotten what you've done. If I get so much of a whisper, a hint, of anyone who daring to try to go against the Inquisition and contact the Venatori, I will burn them."

Then, she sighed. Her fury dissipated immediately like a sputtering candle, replaced by exhaustion. She made her way towards them, leaving the two mages behind silent, wiping her face with a hand, stepping lightly like an elf across snow, almost passing them before she registered their position.

She blinked, as if waking up from a dream, and greeted them each with a slight bow, "Seeker."
"Boss," a low baritone rumbled above his left shoulder. Dorian's heart almost stopped. He spun on his heels and leaped back, his remaining dignity still intact only due to the fact that both the Commander and Seeker Cassandra were also visibly perturbed by the qunari's nearness. He shouldn't be surprised, having heard stories of the talents of the Ben-Hassrath whispered fearfully through the Tevinter Imperium since he was a child.

"Venhedis," he cursed, trying to tamper down the magic that danced on his fingers, and demanded, "How long were you standing there?"

Iron Bull side-glanced towards Amell, who had ducked her head, obviously trying to curb her own laughter. When she finally straightened, the corners of her mouth still twitching, and when all hearts slowed to normal, the qunari winked at her, which shouldn't be possible for someone who wore an eyepatch, "Long enough." Shaking her head, Amell offered the qunari a lazy salute and glided past, one arms extended, fingers gently skimming the wood of the outer stronghold walls.

Her gait was unnaturally smooth and slow: the nightmares still plagued her. (He had packed away sleeping medication into his belongings - perhaps she would find them to be of use.) The Commander's eyes followed her form until she turned left and disappeared past the open gates, his expression... That was not prejudiced hatred: far from it. Dorian felt his eyebrows rise into his hairline as he watched Commander Cullen reluctantly turned his gaze when Iron Bull engaged the Seeker in a conversation.

Oh. Dorian thought. Oh.

**Cassandra**

Short term exposure includes loosening of mental faculties and rationality within the hour. Forced prolonged contact allows red lyrium to insert itself through the skin into the blood and grow parasitically, rendering victim motionless but still living for a minimum of a year. Otherwise, resistance to red lyrium can be slowly built through blood transfusions and skin grafts from more resistant persons (refer to Section B: Sister Nightingale).

The packet had passed through several people before it reached her, wrinkled at the edges, ink blotches between loopy handwriting gave one the impression that the writer had paused one too many times with the pen tip still on the vellum. Methodically composed as if tranquil, the Herald's report was not comforting despite its lack of emotion, more so due to its lack of emotion. Though she never verbally spoke of what had happened in the future, (refused to when questioned, having pointed out that her written word should suffice,) many things were implied between the lines: a future so horrific it was hard to imagine - land so desolate there were not enough people in Thedas for all the rampaging fade creatures on this side of the veil to possess.

Small deposits and red templar camps popped up like embrium as the Herald's group traveled from rift to rift across the continent - closing one small tear at a time. The increasing number of red lyrium nodes spotted in and around the Hinterlands by Sister Leliana's faithful scouts were treated as disquieting premonitions. The Inquisition's reputation and power were only just beginning to spread into daily household conversation, its muscles just beginning to flex. But was its progress fast enough? The future was catching up at an alarming rate.

Commander Cullen's office door was open. The man was inside the room sitting behind his desk, rolling a small bottle of lyrium between his fingers, staring at it with a deep crease between his
eyebrows. She rapped her knuckles on the wall. Noticing her presence, he stood and bowed low, "Cassandra. What can I do for you?" Her heels clicked against the floor as she strolled to the only window of the room. A bookcase stood in the darkest corner, a few torches offered barely enough light for one to work, and a large armchair was seated opposite of him across the desk, a thick blanket was draped over its back. For a moment, she silently scrutinized his condition: his skin was covered in a light sheen of sweat and his eyes a bit darker as his gaze darted between her and the bottle he had set to the side.

"You haven't been taking it?" She measuredly asked, reaching for the bottle, watching him flinch as she picked it up and shook it, hearing the contents swish in the glass.

His line of sight shifted to over her shoulder, "I have been considering the pros and cons of weaning myself off of the doses," he finally admitted, running a hand through his hair, a habit he had picked up from the Herald. "You've read her account about the things she had faced in Redcliffe Castle and what red lyrium can do to a person," he pointed toward the dossier still clenched in her hands, "our lyrium supply lines are strong but they aren't as secured as I would wish. It would be very easy for anyone to slip something in en route."

The north east winds entered the room, ruffling some of his loose papers, bringing in the noise of daytime activities of Haven. Swords clashed onto shields. The cries of Leliana's ravens echoed across the landscape as they hovered low over the ice. Below on a field of snow and rock outcroppings, the Herald was animately discussing magical theory with Solas, using a tree as a prop to cast different variations of the Barrier spell. Cassandra frowned, "Have you told anyone else about your fears and what you intend to do?"

"No," Cullen adamantly refused the implied suggestion, "I don't need to worry the others. It's my own past that I'm facing and I'm still trying to decide whether to take this step," he pushed his chair back and leaned against the wall, supporting his weight with an outstretched arm, "I'm not part of the Templar Order, not since Kirkwall. I shouldn't be relying on the doses anymore. I can't tell her," he muttered, glancing outside with an expression of longing so strong that she felt as though she was intruding upon an intimate moment and turned away, "she already has enough on her mind."

There had been small changes in the Herald's behavior in the aftermath of securing an alliance with the rebel mages. Both elves from the expedition had accepted her increased mother-henning in the form of repeated inquiries on their health and prolonged scrutiny with varying degrees of patience. Without any context, her sudden friendship with a Tevinter Altus mage could be interpreted as something more malevolent. Last night, before the war council disbanded with more work to be had, before leaving, she had wordlessly tucked a sprig of Andraste's Grace into Leliana's hood.

"Some evenings, she sleeps on that chair," Cullen motioned at the plush armchair, "she seeks me out and watches me work when I'm alone. She says nothing other than asking if I'm bothered by her. She stays. I don't know why she," he trailed off and then smiled gently at an unseen memory, "I don't push her." Because that trust so tenuous was a gift not easily given. Because it was his office that was the only true sanctuary where she could seek her version of escapism from prying eyes. Cassandra tried imaging the Herald's figure folded in the armchair, breaths barely heard, dozing off in the bleak moonlight as Cullen watched over her unguarded form.

Immediately following her rise to fame, the Hero of Ferelden was the favorite subject of gossips. Of course, whenever someone is placed on a pedestal by one half of the general public, the other half tries to bring her down. She suffered through various imagined scandals and unfounded rumors - she sacrificed an entire Dalish clan to gain the favor of a werewolf pack, she had allied herself with a darkspawn emissary that had a will of its own to cement her promotion as Warden-Commander, the stories descend further into absolute absurdity.
The largest circulating rumors were the ones that speculated on her romantic life. Did she give her heart to an Antivan assassin or an Orlesian bard? Could she have been crowned Queen of Ferelden alongside King Alistair if she had been nobility? Even as the Herald, with nothing else to do, the people of Haven engaged in idle talk. Blackwall's admiring looks towards her were not missed, neither were Iron Bull's subtly flirtatious and crass comments. Sera preened under the Herald's attentions. Even Lady Josephine's perfected outer diplomatic mask occasionally fell when in her presence. "You need that story," Varric had chided her when Cassandra had expressed her disgust at the slander during one of the Inner Circle's missions to a mountaintop outpost camp in the Storm Coast, "no need to condone them as distractions against duty, think of them as... distractions against the tragedy. Romance makes people lighter. There's a hole in the sky, Seeker. Live and let live. Who doesn't want to hear about love? Of course, we all know the truth," he then wiggled his eyebrows and winked. "Curly had called dibs a long time ago."

Inwardly, Cassandra guiltily consented that before she had formed the Inquisition and met the woman, when stories of the Hero of Ferelden reached even her, in her most idle moments, she had also wondered, daydreamed, and made up tales of fancy.

A sound of glass shattering against the wall jolted her from her thoughts; instinct almost had her draw her sword before she blinked out of automation. A broken bottle of lyrium on the far side of the room, a long blue stain dripping downward through the cracks between the stones, the glass pieces gleamed in the sunlight like broken diamonds. Cullen's jaw was set; he flexed his gloved hand and let out a long breath. He took a few seconds to compose himself, "To work," he sighed, lowering his throwing arm, "I'll clean that up later after I..." swallowing his words, he placed a hand on his stack of papers and sat down, leafing through some notes that detailed the most recent trebuchet calibrations.

"I'll send someone to deal with it," Cassandra offered, planning to also include a decent hot meal with the messenger. Though not a betting woman, she would not hesitate to put down five gold coins on the Commander having not eaten today. "I hope you aren't too overworked?"

Cullen shook his head, smiling ruefully, "Not as much as I had feared. Iron Bull was correct. The number of actual skirmishes between mages and templars in Haven pales in comparison to my projected numbers." He dipped a quill tip into the inkwell and started editing a final report to a war table operation. "Perceptive man, The Iron Bull, eloquent when he wishes to be" he mused, "I can almost see why his clients referred to him as the Gentleman Beast."

"I'm saying that this tentative peace was inspired by both of you," the qunari had explained, inclining his head towards Grand Enchanter Fiona who was still smarting from the not-so delicate threat made by the Herald and then towards the back of Madame Vivienne who had all but stormed away to her alcove in the Chantry, "People look at the Inquisition and think, 'if the Commander and the Herald, two sides of the opposing war, could work together, then I can too extend a hand of friendship across the battle lines.'" Iron Bull grinned widely, stretching his facial scars white, "you're a role model, Commander Cullen."

She dusted dirt off of her armor and pushed herself off the wall. Glass pieces crunched under her boots; she was careful to avoid the puddle of lyrium gathered along the dips in the flooring. Before she fully made her exit, the sound of a pen nib scratching parchment momentarily stopped. "How did Sister Nightingale receive the news about the Inquisition offering an alliance with the mages?" Cullen inquired, as the question drifted into his head. "She didn't seem upset when Amell announced her final verdict."

Cassandra gave an uncharacteristic snort, "Sister Leliana happily supported the Herald's choice. I,"
she lingered at the frame, one hand on the doorknob, as she admitted, "am also slowly beginning to see the benefits of an alliance over conscription." She considered saying more: something about the dangers of removing oneself from lyrium dependency, about his slow courting method with the Herald, about the Inquisition's exponential growth as a military organization. Instead, she simply added, "Do try to get some rest, Cullen. We will be preparing to close the Breach tomorrow at first daylight."
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Then the Maker said:
To you, my second-born, I grant this gift:
**IN YOUR HEART SHALL BURN**
An unquenchable flame
All-consuming, and never satisfied.
From the Fade I crafted you,
And to the Fade you shall return
Each night in dreams
That you may always remember me.

-Threnodies 5:7

**Josephine**

Few people have seen the Herald close a rift so it was not a surprise that when word had spread throughout the camps that preparations were being made to seal the Breach once and for all, that a crowd had gathered around the Temple by midday despite warnings and attempts to stop the growing numbers. Civilians pushed behind the guards and peeked over shoulders, whispering among themselves by the ruins as they pointed at the petrified remnants of the Conclave explosion victims (still in prayer) that still dotted the area, at the red lyrium crystals glowing on the slope side, and at the green, swirling portal that hung in the air, small tendrils wrapped around the geometry, eerily silent. From her vantage point on the high balcony, Josephine spotted members of the Inner Circle among the sea of faces. Commander Cullen observed in the upper walkway, arms folded, motionless, while the Herald's mabari waited at attention by his feet. Leliana crouched on the opposite roof, a raven on each shoulder.

Worried for their audience’s safety, Seeker Cassandra checked the wards one last time as Solas debriefed the mages lined uniformly by the pillars. The warrior raised her sword. As one, a multitude of staff blades stabbed the ground, the additional magic flowing towards the Herald bolstered her as she pushed past the fade aura. She raised her left hand, outstretched palm spitting out green rays of light that pierced through the veil and connected with the centerfold, blindingly bright. Straining against an invisible force, her fingers slowly curled in; a thrum echoed as the rift slowly closed.

The Herald jerked her arm back, shattering the connection as the Breach folded over itself. A shockwave ripped outward, throwing everyone within the vicinity onto their backs. Even Josephine was forced to brace herself when she felt the surrounding air violently shift. Covering her eyes from the falling debris, coughing from the smoke, she leaned forward and tried to see. The ensuing hush was broken by the occasional uneasy murmur. As the dust settled, she could make out a silhouette gingerly trying to stand up.

Seeker Cassandra rushed towards the Herald, hooked an arm under hers, and hauled her to her feet - warily watching as the other woman stumbled once, twice, and finally straightened on her own. It was over.
Cheers erupted from all corners of the clearing, traveling down the mountain side through the path back to Haven. One man pulled out a casket of mead; another pulled out a barrel of wine; within minutes, the alcohol flowed like a flooded river. People broke off into groups, some dancing, laughing, and crying, others gave their heartfelt thanks to the Herald who accepted the words of gratitude with tired grace.

Josephine stepped outside just as the last of the well-wishers departed, close enough to hear Amell give an audible sigh of relief as she rolled her shoulders to check for any lingering aches and pains. "I suspect the celebrations are going to last till tomorrow morning," the Antivan mused, delicately stepping over fade shard remnants on the ground. Acknowledging her words, Amell hummed but did not turn. Instead, she traced a finger along the raised edge of the closed rift, watching in fascination as her mark and the scar shuddered. Solas had said that even closed, it would take weeks for the ambient magic in this dimension to fully erase the healed tear. "Will you join them? You deserve it, Amell."

Sounds of revelries reached their ears - the departing soldiers started singing the famous ballad of Andraste's Mabari. In the distance, fires were lit for a coming feast; the smoke coiled and rose over the hills and trees. Amell tilted her head in thought, pushing her hair back, "Varric told me that there were some drinks waiting for me at the Tavern. But, I'm not one for parties." Rubbing her hands together, she turned on her heels and began the long trek down the path leading to the village below, "I try to avoid them when I can but this one seems to be one that I can't escape from." After a beat, Josephine followed suit.

The distant songs grew muffled as they reached the treeline; the wind picked up as they entered the valley. Their pace quickened into a brisk walk, steps slowed by the growing snowdrifts that scattered on the road. "But you've attended many of King Alistair's fetes," she countered as Haven's lights grew ever closer. "Or so his court says."

Amell clicked her tongue, "It was more like trying to make sure the lout doesn't embarrass himself in front of his political enemies. You wouldn't believe how many illusions I've had to weave whenever he inappropriately laughed at one comment or another. He's better now." An amused grin lit up her features, "It says a lot when someone relies on me, of all people, to navigate through the Ferelden version of The Game." Then, as the songbirds quieted as they drew near their nests, her joviality faded, "I can't stop thinking of what needs to be done," she released a gust of breath, admitting, "I can't relax. Finding the others might do me some good."

Even with the Breach closed, the Inquisition still faced many loose ends that must be pursued. The Herald had been adamant in her search for Warden-Commander Clarel: with the alternate future implicating her as an ally to the Elder One, her days are numbered. Josephine could already imagine the work waiting for her at her desk. Updates need to be sent to their agents and allies in the far reaches of the continent. The civil war in Orlais was reaching a fervor that forced the three warring powers to mobilize their armies, men, and spies. An informer had forwarded the Ambassador evidence on what could be an attempt on Empress Celene's life. Grand Duke Gaspard de Chalons had sent an invite to the Inquisition to attend the Empress's peace talks that would be held later in the season.

Was the Organization ready to take these next steps?

The pair separated at a fork in the road. Amell offered a farewell and a shallow curtsy before taking the path north, perhaps to her friends waiting in the Tavern or to solitude in her cabin, her plans for the night a mystery.

In high spirits, Josephine headed south, slowing as she reached a gathering where she spotted Adan.
merrily finishing a tankard of beer and Seggrit accepting a bowl of vegetable stew from the cook. The air smelled of spices and apple wood. A turning leg of ram roasted over the open camp fire, glistening from the rendering fat that continued to circle around the charred skin and sink back into the meat. A pair of hands offered her a plate of candied fruits and nuts. Another plate piled with cornbread was passed around. This was not the lush banquets she had attended in Antiva and Orlais, but the celebration held its own rustic charm and she found herself lingering instead of looking for Leliana like she had originally planned. A musician brought out a lute and began to play arpeggios rising and falling through the scale. The children began to dance.

There was laughter. Toasts were made to those in the Inquisition and to those dead from the Conclave explosion. Stories were exchanged between men and women of all backgrounds. And then...

And then...

The bells tolled from the watchtower. Faces tilted up, smiles sliding off like oil over wet stone. Echoing across the mountain side, only realized when the hush had fell over all of Haven, was the sound of marching silverite boots and a lone war horn. Small torch lights emerged from the dips between the peaks and slowly cut down a path down the far end of the Frostbacks. The villagers scrambled to their feet. Instincts yelled at them to flee - there was an unspeakable danger approaching. The new arrival felt hostile, it felt cold: "it sings," a newly arrived dwarf recruit described as people stood up, "like red lyrium."

The bells tolled. The advisors had already gathered at the front gates by the time the Herald and Seeker Cassandra appeared: the former, eyes closed, warding off a migraine and latter demanding answers. The news the Commander gave had his closest soldiers shifting uneasily in their ready stance: the massive force on the far slope, with its bulk of troops still on the other side of the mountain, was under no banner.

Someone pounded on the gates, pleading to be let in. A young man named Cole, daggers dripping in blood, stumbled through with news of the red templars and the Elder One spilling off his tongue as though he couldn't contain them.

Had it not been for the visible hostile army heading in their direction, large enough that one could make out glints of red refracted by their own torch lights, Cole would've immediately been deemed insane and dangerous and taken in as an unstable prisoner. With so little time left, he did not wait for a response to his warnings and instead reached out, expression partially hidden by his wide-brim hat, "Please remember," he whispered, "All roads lead to-" fingertips danced lightly over the Herald's red pendant.

"Darkspawn," she finished the catechism without thought. Immediately, she stiffened, unsettled, dual grey eyes piercing through a veil of pain, and assessed the curious man, decidedly off in behavior and appearance. She started to ask, "But how would you..." but her senses distracted her; her head snapped up, focusing on the distant cliffs. "Corruption," she hissed, the mark on her palm flickered bright, "the Elder One," watching the top of the snow-caps where two figures emerged, standing apart from the standard foot soldier, overlooking the march down the mountain trail.

Commander Cullen's eyes narrowed, "Samson," he muttered darkly, drawing his sword. The pair exchanged a look that lasted a heartbeat long. Then, they simultaneously turned back to the gates where long lines of armored men and women waited, postures straight and statuesque.

The Herald released a breath, "Even with the alliance," she critically surveyed the Inquisition troops, "we don't have enough power to match them." She flicked a wrist toward the marching invasion, "However, they aren't using ranged weaponry."
"We will move the fight to their position," the Commander continued her train of thought, expression grim, jaw clenched, "I hope the trebuchets would be enough." An understanding was reached in the uneasy silence that stretched between them as they considered the odds that were stacked against Haven. Before she stepped away, his hand clasped her shoulder as he pulled her close, "Herald," heedless of their audience, refused to let go until he forced eye contact, and parted with message, "be careful." After a long pause and small nod in response, after she vanished, leaving behind a lingering blue frost in the air, he turned, took a deep breath, and rallied his troops.

The Inquisition banner rose as the sound of swords being drawn and shields knocking against metal rang in the air. The Inquisition's war horn sounded, dual low tones shook the hearts within fragile rib cages, soaring over the din of war cries and the loud echo of flying boulders and triggered avalanches. Valuables were swept off tables and into burlap sacks. Footsteps pounded over the embers of dying campfires. A wave of people retreated farther and farther inward until they slammed against the Chantry doors. The twang of another trebuchet releasing its load reverberated in her ears.

The scouts cheered as another boulder hit its mark, burying another flank of the opposition under a small hill of snow and ice. "You are not a battlemaster, Josie," Leliana had warned as the Commander's soldiers mobilized, "Evacuate the young and weak if you must, but do not risk yourself." That was before swords and red lyrium armor that hung like a second skin tore down people and shields alike as if they were paper. That was before smoke so thick it seemed to have a solid form obscured the light from the moon.

That was before the dragon attacked. Despite the Herald's account of the future hinting at a monstrous beast alike in power to an archedemon that was under the thrall of the Elder One, the Spymaster had not expected the dragon.

No one had expected the dragon.

She felt the dragon's red lyrium song before she heard it. She heard the dragon's scream before she spotted its massive form aloft in the sky. The night choked with the smell of burning pine, greedily eating upwards to the shingled rooftops, hopping from house to house. Another wave of fire blocked off the eastern passage to the training courtyard. It smelled of cooked meat, hairs, and fabric.

Josephine had Minaeve's hand in a death grip as they alternated between sprinting through the wreckage and dodging the red templars' line of sight. The mage scholar was limping behind, empty of mana after successfully freezing one of their pursuers, a hand pressed over an open wound on her side, a consequence of not sidestepping a swing from a greatsword in time. The entire engagement had lasted less than two seconds. It had felt like an eternity. Already her nerves were feeling raw from over stimulation.

Everything occurred in a split-second basis. The invasion had overwhelmed the defenders and poured into the village, pouncing on any villager that still remained in the area. The last of her daggers, an initiation gift when she had dabbled in the bardic arts in Orlais, were somewhere behind her, embedded through the horizontal slit of a templar helmet. The Chantry was still far away, anything could happen between the precious seconds it took to run from her position to the open doors. She could hear her own breath and pounding heart. Her eyes struggled to compensate both for the dark night and the bright fires. Her blood pounded hard in her ears, covering up the screams of those being cut down by the knights and the guards...

An enemy emerged from the fires and flanked their left side, a behemoth like creature, more lyrium than man, loomed over them with its arms extended and claws flexed. Josephine jumped back, dragging the Minaeve behind her: the horror did not look like it was built to run, she might be fast enough to fake a left and flee...
Josephine felt a flash of cold at the nape of her neck. A shadowed figure leaped up, stepping on the outgrowths on the monster's back and plunged a sword hilt deep into its crest. Minaeve screamed. The horror buckled; Amell's silhouette fell into view as she twisted the blade and channeled fire down to the tip - a sickening sound erupted as organs, muscles, and crystallized skin ripped and tore. Red lyrium broke off of the massive body and fell off in large chunks, shattering as they hit the ground. The red templar horror bowed and collapsed - the ground vibrated at his weight.

Amell yanked the sword free and stepped off of the corpse, casually flicking blood off of her weapon. She turned towards Josephine but didn't move; instead she watched the Ambassador warily as if afraid - Josephine blinked - afraid that the diplomat and her elven mage companion would run back into danger at the sight of her.

And what a sight it was: if Josephine hadn't had any experience with death and blood, she might have descended into hysteria that would make an Orlesian noble green. Amell's face had locked into an expression that was as grim as it was unreadable, but her dilated pupils betrayed her and her breath was fast. Her pulse jumped at the junction between her jawline and neck. Her arms were littered with burns and shallow scratches. It was hard to tell whether the majority of the blood covering her was her own or someone else's. It has been a while since Josephine had been a bard, but she can still recognize the people who are very, very used to killing and who are very, very good at it.

Amell's head snapped up. A screech echoed above them as they felt the pressing air currents from large wings; the dragon banked and turned, body arching as it circled the east watchtower, its red eyes fixed on their form. The red templars, all but satiated by their bloodlust, turned their attention towards the three remaining survivors outside the Chantry doors. The Herald gave one last glance toward Josephine and Minaeve.

"Go."

Josephine obeyed on shaky legs as the Herald turned around, sword held parallel to the ground, and walked calmly towards the advancing army.

**Cullen**

Templars he had known and fought alongside; the remnants of the Order he had left. A man he had thought was one of his dearest friends, who shared his quarters in Kirkwall, whom he considered to be a close confidante, who turned to the song of red lyrium and willingly submitted to the command of the Elder One. A rogue stranger who spoke phrases designed to unsettle and reveal secrets, half-carrying the mortally wounded form of Chancellor Roderick - no matter whether or not the Inquisition will stand after the invasion, the elder man will not make the night. The Chantry doors closed behind the Herald who staggered in, hands faintly glowing as she healed her hundreds of small cuts that littered her skin. She slumped against a column, blood clumped hair gathered over one shoulder, hand trembling as she reached for a healing potion in her pack.

To think, that if Cassandra had not recruited him into the Inquisition and if he had not accepted the position of Commander of the troops, would he had been a monster, a mindless soldier uncaring of the innocent blood that stained his boots, a lieutenant along with Samson, overlooking the fall of Haven? "I didn't expect to see you again," Amell had said, back when their burdens though heavy did not have that sense of futility of action and certitude of death, back when the sun shined bright and the air did not smell of ash, "I always thought that if we were to ever meet again, it would be on opposite sides on a hill of swords."

Farther in the Chantry huddled what remained of the town, people who watched farms, fields, and
friends burn. Haven was no fortress; it was a dead end for a cornered animal - hopefully one that could scratch and bite back hard enough for the momentum of the Elder One's army to falter - and maybe someone other organization, some other hero and some other band of advisors and companions would have better luck.

Salvation came in the form of a vision given by a dying man.

Grand Chancellor Roderick Asignon had been the ever reliable thorn in the Inquisition's side. There was never a day when he wouldn't sneer at their decisions, where he wouldn't threaten to draft a letter to the upper echelons of the Chantry demanding for their dissolution, when he would curse the Maker's wrath upon them all. But he was harmless if not annoying. "No need to make a martyr out of him," Lady Ambassador had proposed, when the advisors had discussed the options on how to deal with him, flourishing her pen, "our relations with the Chantry cannot change drastically by his word alone, not when we have Mother Giselle supporting our side. Just as long as we make sure he does not leave the grounds."

It was difficult to equate the once proud man to the one now who looked as though a slight wind can blow him over. Every breath that the Chancellor took rattled; fragile bones were barely holding up his limp body. His eyes were outlined in bruises, his lips had no color, it was impossible to tell that the robes that he wore once were partly white. But, he could still talk and that was enough to for him to part with a secret, "has Andraste blessed me with the vision when all the others who know of it are dead from the Conclave? Herald, I remember, years ago," haltingly given between painful gasps when he inadvertently pulled against the hole in his stomach as he stood, "a passage from the back of the Chantry leading into the mountains... It has been so long ago when I took the summer pilgrimage..."

"Hope flies on small wings," the boy added from beneath his brimmed hat as he urged the Chancellor to take a step forward, "paper thin wings. But still it comes."

"A way out?" Amell murmured, coughing into a hand, "I thought the reavers had collapsed the tunnels when I first found the Temple." She grimaced at the droplets of blood staining her left palm and tried to wipe them off, instead smearing the red over the green rune. The walls trembled. One of the many children in the back rooms began crying, loud wails that smothered any other sounds of grief. The barred doors of the Chantry shook ominously on its hinges as forces battered against the other side, "Well. If the Elder One wants me," she decided, voice wavering as she poured a regeneration potion over an open gash on her shoulder, "then I hope he can handle me."

Pale skin previously marred by three claw marks gradually closed over as if they were never there to begin with. She coughed again, hacking ones, violent enough that she almost doubled over: the stone floor is suddenly speckled with red. Stepping away from the Chancellor who was beginning to mutter the Chant of Light feverishly under his breath, Cullen gently guided her back to her feet. The space between her words implied more than what she said - his duties as a Commander to the Herald warred with his devotion as Cullen to Amell, "It's possible to reload the trebuchets before the majority of their forces arrive, but your internal injuries will hinder you," he pressed a gloved hand over her torso, watching her closely to ascertain where his touches caused her to flinch.

"I can still fight." She fingered the tattered cloth beneath her broken chain mail, shrugging the rags back over her shoulder, "the Elder One is a darkspawn. He controls the dragon... Modified archdemon... Whatever it is. I'm a grey warden. It should be enough. It has to be enough." Taking a deep breath, she fiddled with her sleeves and checked the bandaged grip on her sword, "I can distract him, at the very least: buy the Inquisition time to escape and fight for another day."

His tone straddled the line between accusatory and desperate, "And what about the Inquisition's
Herald?" She was the Hero of Ferelden, Ruler of Vigil's Keep, Arlessa of Amaranthine, Commander of the Grey. She was going to walk back out there alone and launch the remaining trebuchets that would bury the entire town in snow. "What of your escape?" He demanded, feeling his heart sink when she swallowed - because they both knew the truth.

"I trust Nathaniel Howe to guide the Ferelden Wardens in my stead. Sister Leliana would know who to contact should I... perish. Please tell them I am sorry," she whispered, shifting her weight from side to side.

"Amell," he pleaded, willing his voice not to crack in grief. "You... can't."

A hand cupped his cheek, she raised her eyes (grey, always grey, the desire demon never managed to replicate the exact shade) and searched his own,"Cullen," he didn't move as her fingers softly stroked his cheek, dragging down along his jawline. She chewed on her lower lip as she struggled to maintain eye contact, a red flush rising from her neckline, "I lo- I... I wish we had more time together. Maybe we could've-" Without warning, she leaned forward on her toes and pressed her lips to his, right where his scar met his mouth.

He inwardly reeled from the sensation - it has been so long since he longed for more than just casual brushes of their hands or the many almosts that they shared during the nights when she let her guard down. But never had he expected the moment when he finally would receive a physical sign of affection from her to be when... When she was not expecting to come back. After eleven years thinking about her, even longer admiring her, and just when they finally reunite under the Maker's will, she was torn from his grasp, even when, this time, he desperately tried to hold onto her. He wanted to shield her from world, despite knowing how capable she was (a templar always protected his mage). He wanted... He reached out, but she stepped back and turned her head to the side, the fire light shined on her stricken face.

Cullen stared at her, memorizing the way her features twist in grim anticipation of the terrors that laid beyond the doors. He cleared his throat, a dead weight sinking into his chest, "Once we reach the treeline, we'll shoot a flare," he managed to choke out, "Amell, make them fear you." A small flicker of a smile danced across her face. Not trusting his own control (he will beg her to flee with them if he lingered), he abruptly turned, ordering his forces that stood to guard the door to retreat back into the inner chambers.

"Let the blade pass through the flesh, let my blood touch the ground, let my cries touch their hearts," the boy muttered, knees shaking as he struggled to hold up the nearly dead weight of the Chancellor, as the sounds of the double doors opened and a wave of magic flooded the area just as the doors closed behind her. "Let mine be the last sacrifice."

Her barrier arced over the Chantry, enveloping the structure in a faint tint of green. Her magic had always felt like an intangible pressure bearing down on the senses, a faint roar in his ears, the smell of ozone heady in the air. The Waking Sea in the summer currents - the rise and fall of its tide - its vastness. This was nothing like her bursts of spells that she had used initially at the start of the invasion against Haven - this was almost a force of nature. He had expected her magic's song to change since she had left Kinloch Hold, he had expected it to evolve, certainly, but not like this.

"Faith in her. Faith in the impossible." Chancellor Roderick mumbled as his eyes fluttered shut as he slowly hobbled, assisted by the boy, down the hallway. "Maker guide the Herald, judge her worthy of your favor, bring salvation to your people."

Cole
In mind and not voice, people are louder the closer they approach death. The crowd dodges the pitch black shadows like it was an entity that would grab the weak and the wounded, snatch them from their mothers' hold - a hungry wolf that was willing to withstand some desperate beatings to drag a leg, an arm, a torso, back into its den. He is swept away by the tide of bodies and mourning cries, all pressing down, suffocating his reach.

The man he holds bears regrets like a liquid form, fearing that they would bubble over and spill if he acknowledges them - his life is held by the faintest spider silk threads, pulled taut through stubborn will alone. A map of their escape is shaped by his words - rough and weary, abrasive on smooth skin - he cares not of the pitying looks from his fellows; he can not see them in the poor light.

Time itself has no meaning to Cole - he counts in changes and hurts, in cracks within white souls that normal eyes cannot comprehend. But he can tell its passage, roughly, in the number of people shivering and the increasing frequency a small group stops as one of their own stumbles over a dip in the path, a small pebble poking out of the dirt, or just their own two feet and bone-set exhaustion.

The trees shrink into shrubbery and then to lichen on grey boulders and still they are encouraged, commanded, to climb. But their boots are already worn down to the barest soles, some heels are already beginning to bleed, purple from frostbite, but they refused to stop and die. The ground tremble beneath their feet. Behind them, a final surge of snow and ice buries the town that had burned. Ahead, the mountains do not invite them with open arms.

The Elder One does not follow them, the remains of his army as pieces of red lyrium, his archdemon that is not an archdemon wounded but at his side. He still angers, rage simmering in an uncontrollable hunger for godhood that would consume himself if he is not careful. Corypheus, the wind whispers, faint and weak. His mages were stolen from him. He has lost the bulk of his templars. He has accomplished nothing. He has an orb and it is not enough. He curses in the language of his homeland, made docile by the passing ages filled with conquests and re-conquests.

A flint strikes hard enough to conjure meager sparks - hands block the growing embers from the biting wind. People shuffled closer to the fire with offerings of wood. Brittle fingers sets up tents, rows and rows that will house broken families. Heads duck under wool blankets, weaved with whispers of blessings, and do not resurface. Frustration festers in idleness - he flits from person to person and is helplessly limited on what he can do by what he has at his disposal - nothing but a promise of quick death.

Regret has many flavors. The scouts should not have been pulled back from their positions when they started dying at their posts. Vigilance should have not faltered. Red lyrium should have never seen the light of day. Elven artifacts should never land in the greedy hands of a human. Should haves do not occur with the right amount of hindsight.

If Cole strains his ears, he could hear the faint tune, hummed in the rhythm of steps sinking into the snow, evoking the memories of a past before the Inquisition, before the rebuilding of the wardens, before the Fifth Blight, when a mage and a templar conversed quietly in the empty halls of Kinloch Hold. She is far away; she is close enough.

Staring at a makeshift table of reports and maps under a half torn awning, Commander Cullen's back is straight, despite the fact that he is inwardly shattering into a thousand pieces: Maker, I beg you not to take her away from me. I am your faithful servant and this is my only plea. Forgive my weakness, I do not know if I have the strength to continue should I find her... He does not hear the song that reaches for him, but he does pivot the moment he feels the hand on his shoulder. Hand on the pommel of his sword, he stares at Cole wildly, then suspiciously, "Do I know you?"

Cole scurries back but maintains eye contact. Her words, confessions, musings, hallucinations, were
threatening to spill out of his mouth with her Ferelden lilt, but he swallows them back. "She's not dead."
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Then the Maker said:
To you, my second-born, I grant this gift:
**IN YOUR HEART SHALL BURN**
An unquenchable flame
All-consuming, and never satisfied.
From the Fade I crafted you,
And to the Fade you shall return
Each night in dreams
That you may always remember me.

-Threnodies 5:7

**Amell**

*What happens when you become a war refugee?*

*You walk.*

Her pants were soaked: above the knees with blood and below the knees with snow. The numbness in her extremities persisted no matter how hard she rubbed her skin or how violently she shivered in the face of the relentless eastern wind, so loud that the sounds of her boots sinking into the snow with each laborious step were all but smothered. Her scarf that covered her face had hardened from her breath and blood. Her magic had retreated deep into her body, prioritizing the need to maintain her inner temperature at the low cutoff of functionality, battling against cold that had settled into her bones and danced around her core, fleeting touches like the fingers of death.

She didn't dare stop, but she did chance a look back. Nothing. Nothing but her faint shadow rising to meet her from the wasteland. There was some acknowledgment within her sluggish mind that this might be where she will die, alone and frozen between jagged peaks, but she couldn't conjure up the energy to feel anything more passionate than vague acceptance.

That same disconnect from emotions, that near absence of feeling, no more than a slight constriction in her chest, had occurred twice before in her life. Once on the day of her Harrowing and subsequent conscription into the Grey Warden ranks, when she had learned of Jowan's betrayal and faced the very likely threat of a year locked in the Aeonar... And once so, so long ago.

In the History section of the Kinloch Hold library, there is a large tome a hand-span thick, hiding between a chronology of the Pentaghast family alliances since the Blessed Age and the tragic biography of the life and lies of Warden-Commander Sophia Dryden, titled *The Noble and Venerated Families of the Free Marches*. The cover smelled of old leather, sewn together and embossed with small precious gems. Each illuminated page was decorated in gold, silver, and vibrant inks; each picture drawn with a loving and dedicated hand.

On the page that showcased the various family crests: one in particular had stood out - two geometric
birds intertwined at their claws, their wings extended upwards, mimicking a city skyline - it matched the carving on her rune stone pendant, the one possession that accompanied her when she had first arrived at Kinloch Hold. She could not remember a life before the Circle: her earliest memory was playing with herself at the foot of First Enchanter (then Senior Enchanter) Irving’s mahogany desk, coaxing bits of ice through her fingertips and encouraging the snowflakes to dance.

Amell... Did she have relations? It was hard to determine: although the illustrator had painstakingly drawn out various family trees spanning several generations back, with each name included with a small portrait, the Amell family members had no discernible features save for the consistent black hair and grey eyes. Was that enough? Maybe, just maybe, she has a family? A loving one? A stern one? One would have invested and cared for her success? She had twirled a strand of hair around her finger and tucked it behind an ear, - black hair, grey eyes - trying to imagine a mother and a father, maybe even brothers and sisters. The tome was an old edition - that meant that these people: Aristide, Fausten, Damion, Revka, Leandra, Gamlen... could be her aunts and uncles, maybe parents... maybe.

She had tried to imagine how life would've been in Kirkwall as a respected family: living in lavishly furnished mansions, attending grand, opulent balls, dancing with men and women from Starkhaven and Tantervale, observing the intrigue and political maneuverings behind silk fans. (A life without encircling stone walls on, without the fear of demons and whispering fade spirits and the ever present threat of becoming tranquil.)

That was her first encounter with fatalism. Vague acceptance: she would never experience the freedom of an everyday citizen; she would always be a prisoner. As quickly as those thoughts came, they were banished, regarded as dangerous. Tears prickled at the edges of her eyes; she quickly wiped them away and leaned back in her chair, putting some distance between her and the book that sat innocently on the table. A lifetime of pondering what-ifs would not help her sanity. It would only remind her of what she doesn't have.

But...

Amell had craned her neck back and stared at the windows, built so high that only the midday sunlight could ever touch the floor. ("It's so people like you and me," Anders had helpfully explained as they practiced casting Winter's Breath on a straw dummy, "mostly me, wouldn't even dream about using them to escape. Don't know why they bother. You won't be able to hit Lake Calenhad even if you took a running jump. You'd just splatter all over the rocks.") She had warily eyed the bookshelves and wondered how long it has been since they were built (but if they've managed to hold all those books, the extra weight of one mage shouldn't upset their structural integrity) and she got the most brilliant idea, the most stupidest idea...

"You're not supposed to be here," a voice, masculine, too young to be a senior, too old to be a recruit, chastised, tone resonating in the chamber that she had up till then presumed empty. Leaning over her perch, she observed the templar silently, her thumb absentmindedly gliding over the etches in her family pendant. Pity he had his helmet on - without, she probably would have been able to place who he was among the many armored that patrolled the halls. He sounded familiar. "Its past curfew. What are you doing up there?"

Watching the sunrise and the streaks of reds, oranges, yellows, and blues that colored the sky and the Bannorn. The feathered clouds swirled around the horizon, seemingly stretched towards her like the beckoning hands of a Desire Demon. "I..." She faltered. When the Circle had grown silent save for Jowan's soft snores in the Apprentice Quarters, she had snuck out past their templar minder to the library and scaled the
shelves. It was dangerous for someone like her to indulge in a moment of spontaneity but after the discovery of what could be her ancestral roots, she just wanted to see and pretend, for once. "I wanted to see what the people outside see."

"You need to come down." Why? All that awaited her was dull walls and duller floors - a stark contrast to the world outside and its vivacity. The Knight Commander Gregoir authorized supervised weekly exercise outside of the tower in the early afternoon but after Anders' third attempt to flee, weekly exercise had dwindled into every other week, sometimes as rare as once a month, depending on the behavior of the mages and the whims of the Chantry. (Anders never failed to be captured and returned, hair disheveled by the wind, skin burnt from the sun, filled with stories of a world they were not familiar with, basking in the envious eyes of his peers.) "Ame- Apprentice Amell. Please."

Grey eyes shifted from the windows back to the templar; she cocked her head to the side, "How do you know my name, Ser Templar?" It was a rule that templars must emotionally dissociate themselves from the apprentices - no fraternal affection, no friendships - not with the risk of a failed Harrowing or a training accident or the Rite of Tranquility. The requirement relaxed after an apprentice ascended into magehood - but prior to that, they do not even talk when prompted (though they will reluctantly accept small snacks when hungry).

Sighing, she descended the side of the shelves, past the books on primal magic, creation, entropy, until her feet was on solid ground. Casting one last look back at the window, she pressed the heel of her palm over her sternum, wincing at the dull ache that was beginning to form. She turned: her gaze refocused on the symbol of the Order that was blazoned proudly on the templar's front and on his right hand which had begun to twitched.

She tried again. "Have we met before?" No audible answer. He stepped towards her, presumably to take her hand to prevent her from leaving his side. Instead, his arms moved around her and she was suddenly swept away by the scent of citrus, armor polish and...

Cullen.

There were wolves howling beyond the deafening roar of the wind. Hovering between alert and unconscious, she was dimly aware of two things: she was cold and she was being carried. Feeling her shiver, Cullen's grip on her tightened, holding her even closer as his pace quickened. Instinctively, she buried her face into the crook of his neck. "Hold on," he whispered into her hair, hot breath ghosting over her temple, "I have you."

**Mother Giselle**

The moment that Seeker Cassandra returned, out of breath and disheveled, and ordered the nearest two scouts to prepare hot water, a bundle of elfroot potion, and a bed, speculations quickly spread from tent to tent. Workers scrambled to their feet as if waking from a spell; Sister Nightingale and Lady Ambassador pulled the warrior aside asking for further details. Not five minutes later, the Commander was spotted on the far side of the mountain slope carrying the Herald in his arms. "Can it be?" hesitant faces poked out of tents, rubbing sleep out of their eyes, "Has Andraste's chosen returned to us?" Albeit she was trembling, feverishly muttering non-stop under her breath as she was lowered into a cot - but she was back.
The battle of Haven had shaken every inhabitant's faith to the core. To see an army of men and women that bore the symbol that was once universally respected and feared descending down on their humble town. To see a dragon burn down what remained standing. To see their defender willingly sacrificing herself for the survival of the townspeople and the Inquisition and then - and then surviving the encounter...

Mother Giselle wiped a hot towel over the Herald's forehead, an island of calmness in the midst of a frantic crowd of healers that came and went. "The darkspawn," the Herald had mumbled deliriously when they had roused her to drink two cups of tonic, "His name is Corypheus." With that revelation, a story had unraveled with the help of the Tevinter mage and a first-hand account by the dwarven companion of the Champion of Kirkwall about a Magister, one of the original seven.

"Those who had sought to claim Heaven by violence destroyed it. What was golden and pure turned black. Those who had once been mage-lords, the brightest of their age, were no longer men, but monsters."

The more the people of Haven learned of this enemy, the more the Herald's triumphs in the face of adversity seemed ordained by the Maker himself. The knowledge that the one responsible for the Conclave explosion, who has finally revealed himself to be something more than an intangible threat, invited a sense of renewed determination within the Inquisition: if he is alive, then he can be killed. The organization will succeed - that is, if they are not torn apart from within. Sighing, she lifted the tent flaps and hooked them onto the crooked overhang.

The advisors had gathered around the only fire that was still tended in the dark of night. Embers sparked, leaping from the ashes and sputtering in the snow, casting sharp shadows on their features, giving them an unusually harsh and otherworldly air. Their voices grew louder as their frustration mounted from their inability to agree upon anything other than the helplessness of their plight.

The Herald gently stirred from her deep sleep; grey eyes that were once glazed and unfocused wearily opened, tracing the edges of the makeshift shelter, no longer with the ghostly pallor she had when she had arrived. As she propped herself upright on her elbows, Mother Giselle pressed a small cup of Madame de Fer's special concoction into her hands - amrita vein steeped in snow water, mixed with pepper and thickened with embrium salve and honey.

"Though you look better, child, I do not wish you to overexert yourself. You are still weak," Mother Giselle soothed as the Herald took hesitant sips. After stabilizing her condition, the healers, magical and non-magical, had proclaimed that there was nothing else they could do for a fever except prescribe undisturbed rest and copious amounts of hot liquids. After assigning Mother Giselle with the task of overseeing her recovery and to alert any of the them when she does wake, the healers proceeded to shoo all the well-wishers out of the awning.

Setting the cup aside on a bedside table, the Herald shifted in a more comfortable position and shivered as a passing wind hit her skin. Sister Nightingale had stripped her of her soaked clothes and armor and dressed her in a thin shift that would've barely covered her modesty if it had not been for the Commander's feathered pauldron that was tucked under her chin and the comforters piled upon her form that shielded her from the bleak environment. "Revered Mother," she softly greeted, "Has any news came about?"

"Not since you last awoke," Mother Giselle replied as she ladled some broth from the small cauldron into a bowl. The qunari mercenary had offered the recipe and sworn by it as a deterrent against frostbitten winters. At least everyone at camp had tried at least one mouthful and all agreed that despite its acquired taste, it did induce a pleasant burn that traveled down from their tongue to their stomachs and warmed brittle fingers. As the Herald poked dubiously at the shredded roots and
chunks of meat with her spoon, Mother Giselle felt her forehead, careful to not disturb the bandages that extended from her left cheek down to her neck - still hot, but not worryingly so.

The Herald bore the ministrations with patience, "No sign of the Elder One?" she prodded as her towel was refreshed.

"None," and not from the lack of trying either - both Sister Nightingale and Commander Cullen had sent out their people to survey the area. The reconnaissance missions had not proven fruitful, which was as reassuring as it was not. Mother Giselle folded her hands in her lap, "Perhaps he is recovering his troop numbers and did not seek to follow us, believing that you are beyond the mortal coil."

"I nearly was," the Herald murmured between spoonfuls of broth. The pair fell into a comfortable silence that allowed the voices outside the shelter to drift their way. The advisor's heated argument, strength having not waned since it had begun, was less like professional council and more as an outlet to vent hot tempers. The sounds washed over their heads with the anticipatory potential of a wave from the Waking Sea. She yawned into the crook of her elbow, "They're very passionate. What are they disagreeing on?"

("We are sitting ducks. It'll only be a matter of time before the Elder One finds us and I don't think he is the type to leave loose ends.

"Where should we go? Redcliffe? Denerim? Val Royeaux? Do you honestly-")

"The future of the Inquisition," Mother Giselle answered, "Our most immediate concerns have been addressed. You have returned to our side. Our supplies are inventoried. Our sick are cared for to our best abilities. Our dead has been counted," her gaze slid past the Herald and onto the row of cots that extended into the next tent. Bodies, covered by a white sheet stained in red, laid motionless like ghosts - Chancellor Roderick was one among the many. "Deliberating is not so easy in our situation when we are offered many roads to take and none that look safe."

("-nobles are with us because of our power. Without that, they wipe their hands of us.

"We have families here! Children! I will not force them to march across Thedas on nothing but a supposition!"

Next to each bed laid a small bottle of deathroot poison: a painless option for those who were unwilling to wait for the morning. Fingering the edges of the feather pauldron, the Herald mused offhandedly, "Would it have been better if I was a martyr?" Outside, Lady Ambassador quickly placed herself between Sister Nightingale and Commander Cullen who seemed to be coming to physical blows.

"Decisions would be made at a faster rate," Mother Giselle allowed, "but that would be because the Inquisition would start from a lower state. What you are suggesting is a much darker alternative." Progress would be fueled by grief, desperation, and vengeance - though it has been only a few scant months - the Herald, through action, words, and intent, had settled into the hearts of many in the organization. "Your presence has increased the general consensus that we are aided by a greater being. Belief has increased, even among those who had doubted. You are our embodiment of hope and faith. They are powerful emotions. They have started wars, they have ended wars; they have formed the countries we know today, they have felled many before ours."

Seeker Cassandra retreated back to her table of maps and markers, sullen and exhausted, leaving the three advisors to brood by the fire, each in their own little world of solitude. The Herald's lips quirked in a pretense of a smile as she scanned the field, at the father who was showing his two daughters how to read the constellations, at the elder woman praying at a hastily built altar to the
Maker, at the few who still braved the winds and ventured outside, "Do you really think I am the Herald of Andraste?"

Mother Giselle closed her eyes in thought: her faith as a Chantry sister and her practicality that she had gained on the field during the mage-templar war, treating whomever needed to be treated, seeing first hand how the history between the two groups have festered hate and fear, made an odd combination. She stood out among her peers as an unusual, brave, but still respected figure. "I believe that what you have accomplished is not without divine intervention. The way the world had shaped itself is not anything that could be called a coincidence."

Grey eyes narrowed - her assessing gaze felt like a call of judgment, as if the decision she would come to make was going to establish an intangible force to push the Inquisition to take one of two paths: belief or non-belief. For a moment, Mother Giselle wondered if she should have said more. The Herald sighed, tension escaping from her shoulders as her knuckles press into her eyes, "The Maker sees fit to guide me through his many trials and tribulations. This is the second time I've emerged from whatever challenge he has given me, half-dead, half-alive. I am not tired. Yet." Her finger glided down the edges of her bandages, tracing the lines of her facial markings, "If it gives them faith, I would not correct you."

Mother Giselle lowered her head in gratitude, "You are generous to your people, Herald. Do not ignore the support you have around you. As much as you are willing to help them, they are willing to assist you." The Herald hummed in response as she sunk back into her arrangement of blankets, Madame de Fer's tea beginning to flood her with renewed lethargy. Mother Giselle stepped out from under the tarp, intent on searching for one of the few healers that was still awake at this odd hour. "Blessed are those unshaken by the darkness of the world."

Commander Cullen was immediately alerted at her presence. She didn't notice how his eyes locked onto her as the sounds of her footsteps walking through the snow grew more audible, but she did notice how he quickly reached her side in three quick strides and glanced up when he cleared his throat, "Revered Mother," bringing an arm up to his chest and bowing, taking great pains to give her proper deference although his attention kept being drawn towards the Herald's dark silhouette, "May I ask: how is she?"

Mother Giselle smiled, the first true one she offered since the fall of Haven, "Resting. She'll be happy to see you." The Commander returned the smile, albeit shakier and unsure. Mother Giselle watched as he accepted the unspoken permission, turned away from the fire, how his look of apprehension gave way to relief as he disappeared under the shelter, how he quickly intertwined his fingers with hers, even as she was rapidly falling back asleep.

(Perhaps she should wait before alerting the healers - there was no rush.) Above her was a clear sky, a canvas of stars, immutable through the many ages that has passed the world. Below them was the constant flux of people and movement among the landscape - seeking, yearning, surviving. In the middle of the Frostback Mountains, at an altitude so high that some found it problematic to breath, the Inquisition quietly licked its wounds. She saw twisted hearts and directionless eyes. Mother Giselle closed her eyes and stepped towards the camp fire.

And then, she began to sing

Solas

"No one alive knows how to create and manipulate magical foci," her fingers danced along the edges
of the veilfire torch as she frowned in thought, "Well, not anymore, an ancient darkspawn Magister
would. Shame that he returned with delusions of godhood instead of with love of lost knowledge."
The last sentence more for her own ears than his. A small surge of mana later and she held a blue-
green ball of fire in her palm that bore a startling resemblance to the Orb of Destruction.

Her memory was impressive - she even mimicked the groove patterns that circled and looped over
the surface of the sphere. But it was not tangible; it was not his. "It does not belong to the
Magisterium," kneading the bridge of his nose, Solas shook his head, crushing the urge to growl at
the perversion that time had wrought on his people's history. She casually flicked her wrist, the
imitation dissipating soundlessly into the chilled air, "Focii are an elven invention - another skill
stolen by Tevinters when they invaded and pillaged the ancient lands. They are rare and prized
artifacts that were said to hold the power and skills of the elven gods. How he managed to procure
one - I do not know."

Amell hummed as she turned her bandaged left hand over, hints of Fade magic peeking between the
gauze, "I felt its power," she murmured, barely heard over the din of activity of the campgrounds that
held renewed life and motivation after the Chantry Sister's song. Sounds of clinking metal and soft
laughter drifted past the rock cliff and the cluster of everite deposits to their area, as if there was a
new Haven. "When Corypheus got close enough, the foci sought and connected with the Anchor."

A raven flew overhead - Sister Nightingale was growing anxious at their prolonged disappearance.
Clasping his arms behind his back, Solas nodded, "Like attracts like." He allowed, falling into the
familiar tones of a scholar, "They were once used so frequently in Elhvenan that the veil separating
this world from the Fade became thin enough that even non-mages could interact with the
doorways." The entire region had been tinted in green - a thick miasma of heady power drifted from
the opened portals, diffusing and mixing with the air of the sea and skies.

The light of the veilfire illuminated her grey eyes, which locked onto his as she tilted her head in
thought, "I believe you when you say the orb is elven," she decided, shivering as a crosswind
wrapped its cold arms around them and threatened to blow out the torch. "It sings like one: sounds
like you," and she smiled, as if they were sharing a private joke - like she knew the secrets he had not
verbalized. He wondered if she could somehow feel the imprint on his magic despite the thousands
of years of neglect and eventual lost connection to the Fade. Somewhere deep in his core, were there
still the remnants of fundamental aspects of which defined Fen'Harel?

Redcliffe had changed the dynamics between her and him from curious professionalism to curioser
camaraderie. Their initial meeting was one based upon the understanding that the similarities between
them ended at their mutual magical background and love for knowledge, but he had cultivated lasting
friendships on shakier ground. Most topics that they had shared in idle conversation, between the
departures and returns of Sister Nightingale's forward scouts and in the lulls at Haven in the small
clearing between their cottages, had been about magical theory.

("Twisting the veil into a mobius strip blocks the problematic side effects of transitioning from intent
to outcome. Positive feedback loop - ergo, stronger, longer lasting spells."

"Yes, but you would sacrifice precision and time due to ambient magic generated on the field.
Blending your aura into -")

Solas puzzled over what he could have possibly said in the alternative bleak future. Did he confess
his hand in the explosion of the Conclave and the formation of the Breach? Did he hint at his true
nature? Or was it something more subtle - did he tell her that as he slept, he dreamed of the Battle of
Ostagar and saw two grey wardens, unseasoned fighters barely pass their recruitment stage, fighting
desperately to the top of the tower beacon? Did he tell her how he marveled at the disparate amount
of bravery that shone within her compared to her young age? Did he ask her why Mythal had chosen to save her?

He never hid his distaste for the grey wardens and whenever the topic of the organization was broached, he grew either non-committal or critical about their influence that they thoughtlessly flung about compared to the startling lack of knowledge of the very entities that they were fighting. But unlike Blackwall who, having held the wardens in high regard, quickly grew defensive and a bit off-guard, the commander herself found his opinions more intriguing than suspicious. Her relentless questioning had reminded him of the inquisitiveness of a da'len mixed with the predatory air of a varghest.

"Is it the killing of the Archdemon that makes you mad? I knew of a cult that worshiped a high dragon," she mused, perched on the roof of her cabin as she patiently awaited for her faithful mabari to return. She shifted from foot to foot; loose snow fell from the rooftop in small clumps, "Even the people who are not in cults respect their power: Bull, for example." Amell pointed to the distant figure who was sparring with the Seeker on the training grounds, moving at a speed that should not be possible considering his bulk, "for him, its a sexual pleasure."

Solas faltered, unsure whether to be affronted or exasperated, "I am not the Iron Bull. Regardless, my reasons behind my thoughts are personal matters." A raven cried in the east watchtower. Seeker Cassandra rushed forward and feinted to the left, swinging her shield parallel to the ground, knocking the massive qunari off-balance. Solas cleared his throat, unsure of how much to give and how much to hide, "I would really rather not go in depth-"

"Five Blights have already passed," Amell further pressed as she leaned over the eaves, "There are two old gods remaining." The afternoon sun above bestowed a shadow that sharpened her features. A Redcliffe mage hurried by, rushing out of the apothecary and down the stairs toward the tavern with a bundle of lyrium potions in her arms. "Would you rather the grey wardens concentrate only on the darkspawn?"

Her interrogation was cut short by a series of barks - her mabari returned with his stick in tow. Bounding up the stairs and over the bushes, he deposited the gift under her swinging feet and spun in small, happy circles. Solas's tense posture did not immediately slack when her attention was momentarily diverted to her beloved companion - but he did breath easier for the next few minutes that she had spent praising and cooing the animal in turn. At his seat where the fence met the walls of his cabin, he noted with some bemusement that the dog still carefully gave him a wide berth.

"Strange," she had commented when he was first introduced to the mabari who had taken one look at him, retreated slowly, and growled, ears peeled back, teeth bared. "Dog is usually friendly around elves. Maybe you remind him of Keeper Zathrian." Immediately looking contrite, she had refused to elaborate, as if drawing the comparison had caused her to unintentionally insult him.

Though Mabari war hounds had been bred by mage and magic for their intelligence and fighting ability, he wondered if they had accidentally, along the way, developed some preternatural sixth sense. The pungent scent of Kaddis of the Trickster, finger-painted on his body in a mimicry of the facial tattoos of his master, should block most of his ability to smell the minute differences between Solas the elf and Fen'Harel the wolf. But it was said that the greatest dog warriors had the ability to shake off magic spells like water rolling down their backs - increased willpower and increased magical resistance could
engender an awareness towards...

("Take the Dread Wolf by the ear if he comes," the Dalish clans whispered to their dogs.)

The barking of the war hound as he sprinted out of their line of sight, again chasing the stick that she had flung in the direction of the smithy had Solas shaking out of his reverie. "You do not even fully understand what you are fighting. Is it darkspawn? Is it the Blight? Is it the corruption inherent in the world of which the darkspawn is only one small part?" His fingers drummed a fast tempo against the fence post, "Are you battling against the world?"

She stared into the distance, gaze focused on the Breach suspended high in the mountain tops. "If people die, I'm obligated to stop them from dying."

Nothing could be that straightforward - but there was logic in simplicity. He didn't try to refute her.

They were blessed with continuous days and nights of clear skies as they trekked their way through the mountain pass. The path beneath them used to be paved with polished obsidian and emeralds, indicating the direction of where elves once hiked to worship their gods and goddesses. Rows of brontos breathed heavily as they pulled wagons as large as aravels, flanked on each side by weathered and tired families. The Inner Circle had scattered along the edges of the group, alert for any signs of hostility, as he and the Herald took point.

"The songs are getting louder," she observed, tucking a strand of hair behind an ear. "We are getting close to whatever you're trying to find," she frowned, tilting her head toward the sun and breathing deeply in. "Does this the path connected the empire with the kingdom? Was this a trade route?"

His feet remembered the texture of the dirt biting into his soles. The mountains were familiar to him in shape and intensity of presence - as was the call that drove him forward, the siren song that beckoned the company towards the highest peaks where a single river traversed the Frostbacks. He was sure that she could also feel the constant pull from the north. "A pilgrimage trail," he replied, "to a site designed for ritual magic." It had leaked into the foundations before the early Fereldens transformed the area into a keep, bleeding dry any nearby quarries in a wide radius from here to the Hinterlands.

The pair of them were the first to round the slope and see the towers peak above the clouds, a keep bordered by sharp peaks, standing directly over the wide river. Magnificence in physicality; aged in neglect. Even from the distance, one could make out the signs of disrepair and structural collapse. While Solas leaned back against the rock face, she pushed ahead until she stood with her shoes toeing the edge of the precipice. "The place is grand, Solas." She exclaimed as she slowly registered the scenery standing before her, a smile dancing on her lips, "You dreamed of this?" The glance back she offered was a fine mixture of awe, glee, and curiosity.

He faintly registered the sounds of the others slowly marching toward their area. Closing his eyes, he allowed his senses to stretch outward, reaching for the source of the ambient magic that awaited its future inhabitants. "It had made its impression upon many souls. The memories that contain it are passionate and powerful. The Fade picks up the strong feelings, even from those that have been dead for centuries. I believe it will suite your needs, Herald."

She didn't seem to have heard him - head tilted to the side as if... "Do you hear that?" she pressed her index finger against her lips, "There's a wolf out there." The strangely intuitive comment brought a strange chill down his back: the fourth one she had made in his presence thus far. He wondered if
there was more to her story of giving an elven phylactery final rights deep in the Lower Brecilian Ruins and being gifted the knowledge of the Dirth'ena Enasalin. Did she also gain knowledge of the mythos surrounding elven tradition? Possibly more? (It might explain why she sometimes moved like one - soft sure steps, nearly silence even on a forest ground covered in autumn leaves or fresh fallen snow. It might explain her sensitivity towards ancient elven magics.)

Seeker Cassandra was the first to reach their sphere of silence. Her sharp intake of breath was barely noticeable against the strong head winds that they faced and the roaring cold waters below. Slowly, the rest of the party climbed the slope behind them and trickled around them, filling the space between boulders and still bodies. A hush fell over the crowd as they beheld the fortress, the main gate, and the single bridge that offered the only way in and out of the stronghold, too stunned to even whisper praises to their god. Rounded towers of Ferelden architecture jutted out behind high stone walls, all sitting on sacred elven ground, his sacred ground where he had dwelled and roamed, rested and plotted - saturated in memories both happy and bitter.

It was the Herald who first shattered the silence, "Did the Fade whisper to you its name?"

He fought to suppress a pleased smile, "It has collected many names since it was built, many that originated from languages long forgotten. Tarasyl'an Te'las was its most common designation. You may call it Skyhold."
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Then the Maker said:
To you, my second-born, I grant this gift:
**IN YOUR HEART SHALL BURN**
An unquenchable flame
All-consuming, and never satisfied.
From the Fade I crafted you,
And to the Fade you shall return
Each night in dreams

Cassandra

The moment the Herald crossed the high arch of the castle gate, the first foot of many to step into the courtyard, Cassandra felt the errant puzzle pieces that made up the heart of the Inquisition firmly slot into place. Haven, as its namesake itself invoked a sense of the transience, was never meant to be a permanent stay: it was not a stronghold, it did not offer ample protection against outside threats. But here, "Skyhold," Solas had called the keep and turned away when he could not hide the strong affection from his eyes, as though it was he who had given the earth beneath their feet its magical thrum, who had manually laid down the stones and applied the mortar between the uneven gaps where the edges meet.

Here, potential was present like the moss stubbornly clinging to the north side of the fallen boulders, the vines that threatened to swallow the high windows, and the overgrowth that forced the Inquisition soldiers to hack at the their branches as the party pushed farther in. To think that there was an oasis that waited for them in the stark white, grey, and brown color palette of the surrounding mountains. To think that it was theirs.

It took a few days for the initial frenzied movements of moving and unpacking and settling to slow enough for people to think. In that time, the Inner Circle made themselves scarce as they busied themselves with assisting the help using whatever skills and tools they had at their disposal. Workers began to clear the debris and rubble that blocked the passage through the double doors that led into the throne room. The tavern was the first to be refurbished. Supplies were stacked in the peripheries, waiting to be transported as soon as the interiors of the fortress became accessible: spindly legged escritoires, oak bookcases, bundles of herbs, rolls of fabrics, standard issued swords... The list of what they did have rivaled the length of the list of what they did not have. Pilgrims arrived daily from every settlement in the region - low Ferelden timbre mixed with Orlesian musical cadences as they talked of their backgrounds, their futures, the Elder One, and the Herald.

Curious and reverent eyes lingered on a woman of hair so black it held a faint blue hue in the sunlight, pulled back by intricately twining ribbons and strings, who flickered in and out of view like a mirage as she answered the countless needs of her people. Occasionally, one could spy her by the outer bulwark, brushing her fingers along the uneven surface of stone and cast stone, as if she was feeling more than just the morning dewdrops.

It took a few days for the advisors to come to a decision. In the end, there was no contesting the
Herald's role in the Inquisition. There was no other person who could challenge her leadership to even the the slightest degree of her commandeered deference and awe. No one had even entertained the thought.

The air was crisp in the early morning and many inhabitants loitered in the open grounds, chatting with one another in easy conversation as they awaited for their breakfasts to finish cooking over the open fire. Cassandra stood under a branch of rich maroon leaves when Amell emerged from Master Harrit's temporary stead. The Seeker kept her feet at shoulders width, hands behind her back, face devoid of any expression - it was a stance that all who belonged to any military organization are familiar with and conveyed the messages: information to report; walk with me.

It took a few days for wearied looks of refugees to clear and for aching feet to rest. Attentions turned outward as people began to wonder how the Inquisition was going to defeat Corypheus and whether or not there was even enough power to outmaneuver his own military might. The Inquisition still had most of its power that it had gained during its stay in Haven but they were scattered among the many metaphorical wounds that still had to be patched - soldiers ranks to be replenished, healers to be recruited, merchants to be invited to these walls, agents to be sent ever farther from their base of operations.

"Give it time," Amell ducked under the yellow foliage of a young beech tree that stood at the foot of the stairs, plucking a leaf and admiring its hue, "power centralizes on its own. You don't need to worry about that." She absentmindedly twirled the petiole, "What you need to do is find a way to break the war council's three-way tie." The three branches of the Inquisition, military, political, and espionage, at their foundations, mixed together in a characteristic manner of oil and water. "Luckily for you, there are many ways to do so."

In Cassandra's opinion, there was only one way. "The Inquisition needs a leader."

It took one heartbeat of silence for her to follow the non-verbal line of reasoning and reach the same conclusion that the advisors had. "Oh? And you think that I..." and her voice trailed off as the sentence remained unfinished. The leaf slipped through her loose fingers, fluttering down to the earth.

One who has already taken the mantle in an unofficial manner. One whose actions has allowed us to close the Breach and escape the wrath of the Elder One. "Were you not expecting this?" Cassandra asked. It was obvious to any other that she was the best choice - the only choice that held unanimous support. "Before the explosion of the Conclave, you were our first choice. The late Divine Justinia had searched for you. We held you in high regard, even before all of the accomplishments you have had while with us."

"I try not to think about it, but that's not an excuse." Amell laughed under her breath, ran a hand through her hair, "I had believed, hoped, I guess, that things wouldn't change. Or at least, if they did, that..." she sighed, "It's obvious in hindsight." They reached the platform where Leliana waited patiently some paces away with a broadsword in hand. Amell glanced between the two, Seeker and Spymaster, brow furrowing, "Considering how much power I already have, this," she gestured towards the sword after a long minute of silence, "should worry you."

"Handing anyone that much power is troubling," Cassandra admitted as Amell brushed her fingers down the unsharpened edge and then back towards the decorative hilt over the scales of the entwined dragon, down the curve of its horns and over the red ruby eye, "But we know you and we trust you. There would've been no Inquisition without you. I have faith that it was meant to be you who lead us to where we are meant to go."

A crowd had long gathered at the base of the platform during their discussion, drawn by the
solemnity of ceremony and the sharp edge in the air of history being written. Cullen and Josephine stood at the front and side; the Inner Circle lined the back. Amell's eyes flickered over the silent congregation, "This is your design," she said to Leliana with equal parts accusation and exasperation.

The Spymaster inclined her head and offered a closed-lip smile, "We've all agreed first. But yes, I planned out how. You would've said no if I had asked first - and sometimes, it is easier to apologize later than to get permission. Look. Your people are waiting for you." The crowd bristled in anticipation. Amell stared at the sword as if a mere touch would awaken the dragon hilt and summon the being from its metal form. Still, her fingers slowly curled around the grip. "Do you accept?"

"You know me so well, Leliana," she murmured as she grasped the handle and lifted. With a flick of her wrist, she swung the broadsword in a graceful arc with the ease of a warrior, and stopped at the on-guard position, tip pointing towards the sun.

Below her, the crowd began to cheer.

**Leliana**

The throne room smelled of decaying wood and stale air, untouched for centuries. Small dust clouds swirled at their ankles with each step that they took, causing Josephine to sneeze delicately into her handkerchief. The three patterned stain glass windows on the far end of the hall offered three seemly solid pillars of light that shined onto the dais. Brief visions flashed across her eyes: instead of ruined upholstery, she saw rows of mahogany tables and cushioned chairs, instead of the fine coating of dust and grime covering the wooden floors, she saw carpets imported from Orlais and across the Waking Sea, instead of rubble and dubious structural integrity she saw the endless criss cross scaffolding reaching to the high ceilings.

She would see to it personally that the keep will return to its old majesty. A light frisson ran down her spine, similar to the sensation that passed during the ceremony just hours prior. The memory lingered in the the heavy air, the people's sentiments had echoed their Commander's cry, their fervor rose with their faith until she was nearly dizzy with the passion.

"Will you follow? Will you fight? Will we triumph? Your leader, your Herald, your Inquisitor!"

Yet, her heart still felt the ghostly stabs of guilt : the title bestowed upon her old friend was another burden, another weight. Since she had gained the title of Herald, Amell looked constantly tired - more so than any of her peers - both the Calling, the dreadful beckoning that dragged wardens to their deaths in the Deep Roads, and her duties, that ever strong conscience that established liability over every life in the Inquisition, had her keeping odd hours - late at night, early in the morning.

Her nightmares were not a secret among the advisors and not a secret among the Inner Circle after they started pulling shifts, watching over her frail form back at the summit camp in the mountains. But the average person still had yet to find out about the night terrors: the anguished cries and the restless hands that clenched tightly at the edges of her cot. Exhaustion was her standard state of being.

Thankfully, Amell's goals as the Warden-Commander of Ferelden had coincided with her goals as the Inquisitor. She balanced both positions, shifting the fulcrum on a inlaid gold set scale, applying her attentions at each side - making sure that it would never heavily favor one side. But should she ever have to choose...

Since the ceremony, the all-encompassing question Leliana silently asked leaned away from 'Could
the Elder One be defeated?' and into 'What will happen once Corypheus is dead?' as the Inquisition rode on a wave of belief that failure was impossible, stirring souls into transcending their physical limitations. Mother Giselle had told Amell that the first Inquisition had dissolved after the Nevarran Accord, after purging the world of the blood mages, the heretical cults, the abominations, and spreading the Chant of Light as far as they could reach, heavily implying that this was also to be the fate of this incarnation. That assurance was one of the main reasons why Amell, however reluctantly, took the sword and made her vows upon it to serve and protect. Though she did not verbalize it, she was wary of power, despite how much she held in her hands.

The Ferelden Grey Wardens were her family, one that she had painstakingly created recruit by recruit, until, a decade later gained a reputation beyond the country as one that though still relatively low in manpower compared to its sister organizations, boasted individuals of coveted skills and abilities. The group that had traversed all of Ferelden to conquer the Fifth Blight had been her family: long nights around the campfire, trading stories, ribald jokes, and gifts. But when the Archdemon died, its headless body lying under the mage warden's feet, after promising to write, the group scattered to the four winds - each following their own path away from Denerim. Sten returned to Seheron and rapidly ascended the ranks until he could not any longer and Zevrano to Antiva, quickly becoming a headache for his old organization. Wynne and Shale followed the cry of the Libertarian mages, seeking out forgotten secrets between the Chantry and the Circles as the White Spire fell. Leliana transformed herself into a tool to be used at the command of her old friend, walking the shadows as terrified whispers followed her steps and made her smile, "Left Hand of the Divine: Sister Nightingale."

Within the war torn country of Ferelden, the only companions that could truly say that they stayed by her side were Oghren, who joined the order, and Dog, of which it was his nature to stay at her side. Alistair, the King of Ferelden, visited the rebuilt arling often enough that he was eventually included in the short list.

If Corypheus died tomorrow, Amell would not hesitate to return east to the waiting arms of her fellow brothers and sisters. But there was time enough for Sister Nightingale to plan, swearing that with her second chance, she will not let her dear friend go that easily. Still, she swore, when she had left the Orlesian courts, that she would not manipulate her friends, but that didn't mean that she can shift the parameters of the possibilities... Sister Nightingale retreated to the corners of her mind; Leliana bit down on her lip hard enough to draw blood as she disposed of those dangerous ideas. She neither wished for Amell to leave, neither did she wish to steal her from the Grey Wardens. The future is not set in stone: only the Maker decides where it goes. (The old jealous voice within her that still remembered of her past infatuation with the mage warden, long dead from neglect, was still smarting from the fact that Alistair had monopolized her attention for ten years and did so without ever successfully giving her the Lothering rose.)

What would it take to have her considering to stay? Though Amell had already begun the process of making friends with her easy charm and cheerful personality, the Inquisition was at its roots a military organization with a far more professional bearing than Amaranthine. It would not be enough, but what would? Leliana's gaze slid towards the Commander who was engaged in a discussion about the logistics of sending troops to secure outposts in the Exalted Plains... (His entire countenance brightens whenever his eyes alighted upon her, he is drawn to her as a moth to flame.)

The addition to their gathering of one Varric Tethras, whose arrival was accompanied by the sounds of creaking hinges and the brush of wind outside stirring the debris littering the ground shifted the conversation from the impending peace talks at Halamshiral and the possible assassination of Empress Celene to the situation regarding the Grey Wardens and the possible demon army. When the dwarf hinted the arrival of a visitor, an outside source, that will be making a temporary home in the Skyhold barracks if the Inquisition would allow him, his entire audience all exchanged a
knowing look. A myriad of emotions flitted across her face: apprehension, determination, joy. Though the arrival of the Champion of Kirkwall meant that Amell was finally going to meet with her famous (infamous) cousin, it also meant that the situation with Senior Warden Stroud was growing more precarious.

"At least they cannot do worse." Josephine remarked as she made a few notations on her clipboard, "for what is more horrific than facing a summoned demon army?"

Varric snorted in amusement, "Famous last words, Ruffles. Famous last words." He warned, rapping a knuckle against Bianca's grip. "Anyways," he addressed Amell, "come to the battlements later, when you finish your afternoon rounds. We'll be ready for you by then." As he left the group, walking backwards toward the double doors, he bowed low at the waist, "I'll prepare everything else. By your leave, your Inquisitorialness." The sounds of his footsteps fading from the chamber mixed with the din of activity beyond the doorway.

"Cassandra's not going to be happy," Leliana said mildly, brushing away the dust on her shoulders, when the dwarf's silhouette vanished beyond their line of sight. Her observation was met with a collective wince - the Seeker's fury was not one to be trifled with. The next few days would not be easy for Varric's general well-being.

Josephine sneezed again, "Well then. Now that we stand to move on both these concerns, I will take my leave." She swept an index finger over the surface of the wall trimmings, grimacing as the thin layer of dust and dirt stuck to her fingertips, "I will hire some contractors later to begin restoration and send our invitation acceptance to Grand Duke Gaspard de Chalons. See me later, Inquisitor, so we can make a tentative schedule for your lessons in Orlesian etiquette and politics."

"The soldiers are ready when you are, Inquisitor. Just say the word. Warden-Commander Clarel will not know what she is contending with." Cullen assured as the council began walking towards the threshold.

The western wind blew in the scent of fallen leaves and smith fires, a welcome change from the stagnancy indoors. Below in the courtyard, Enchanter Ellandra and Belle, two of Josephine's agents, waited with an armful of scrolls bearing noble house insignias. With a minute rustle of silk and a shallow curtsy, she, too, departed. Closing her eyes, Amell took a few moments to softly inhale the fresh air. She was about to descend the stairs and join the late morning rush when Cullen reached out, hand suddenly cupping the curve of her shoulder.

"Wait, Amell," He started, glancing briefly at Leliana. Leliana raised an eyebrow as Cullen turned slowly red, his other hand coming up to rub the nape of his neck, "if you are not busy right now. Can we discuss a matter," he paused and swallowed tightly, "privately?"

Amused, Leliana decided to deign the commander's unspoken yet pointed request and melted into the shadows. So began another dance between the Herald and the Commander - what would it be this time? One inspired by the playful tune of a fiddle in the taverns? A smooth waltz with them gliding from one corner of the ballroom to the other? Or would it be the soft swaying of hips moving to no audible music or rhythm in an empty room, his arm around her waist, her head resting on his shoulder? Leliana stayed long enough to watch Amell startle out from of her reverie before slipping away to find her scouts.

Amell turned towards the man and blinked in confusion. "I would - what? We..." Though initially lost for words, she quickly picked up on his hints. Then, immediately, she matched the Commander in intensity of blush and averted her eyes. She slowly reached up and gently loosened his grip, but she did not let his hand go, and instead intertwined their fingers together. She sighed, lifting her gaze to meet his. "You're right." She murmured with an unreadable tone and a half smile full of
Amell

By the time she entered her Harrowing, she had cultivated a network of favors among acquaintances and boasted of two friendships. While her relationship with Jowan thrived on a mutual hatred for creation and spiritual healing magics, her relationship with Cullen was late nights over a chessboard, exchanging stories of day to day activities, discussing everything from the metaphysical: dreams and aspirations, to the concrete: the various people that walked these halls and the beauty of sunrises in the mornings.

So there was this templar, who was not like the other templars. He didn't laugh when you had declared your intentions to become a future battlemage, despite your horrific test scores due to your tendency of using your staff as a spear and not as an actual mage staff, and instead offered you some basic sword forms that he learned in his early years as a recruit. He didn't laugh when you offered him your family pendant, holding every what could have been scenario had you not been a mage in its white-gold design, the night before you were forced to leave the Ferelden Circle, Jowan's blood dotting the hems of your robes. You hadn't known how to properly say farewell to the only person who still stood at your side and gifting him with the Amell crest seemed oddly fitting - it was a charm of good luck and, well, there will be at least one who would cherish the memories of you in the tower.

You become a warden.

So there was this templar, who, after you had saved your old home from blood mages and demons, cursed you and professed his love for you in one breath. Whatever potential life you could've had with him disappeared along with his affections and good will. Instead of feeling angry at the person responsible for the sudden emptiness, you buried the negativity under your burdens and when you dropped off Dagna to First Enchanter Irving and saw him standing in the corner, still refusing to even look in your direction, you silently swore that this was the last time you would set foot into this place. (You later broke your word when you were searching for Morrigan and her son but by then, he was already gone.)

With the Archdemon dead, with the Darkspawn Civil War resolved and both leaders dead, ten years passed in a strange blur of traveling wherever her feet took her in and around Ferelden, visiting old friends such as the rhyming Grand Oak in the Brecilian Forest and Corra who still worked at Tapster's Tavern, along the way picking up potential warden recruits like burrs on ring velvet. Ten years of... not exactly happiness and bliss, but pleasant contentment of her role in life.

Then the Calling struck - a thick wave of black and glowing red whose slow fingers slowly pierced through the realm of dreams. The older wardens were the first ones who heard the voices of the Old Gods in their sleep but it wasn't until the newly conscripted were found walking westward bound in a hypnotic state that Amell began to hazard a guess of foul play and forced a march of her remaining loyal, those who hadn't departed to the Deep Roads or deflected across borders to Warden-Commander Clarel, to Soldier's Peak where Avernus waited for them. Then, after being assured of their safety and placing her second-in-command, Warden Constable Howe, in charge, bringing along Dog, Amell chased after the little trail of bread crumbs left by Senior Warden Janeka to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. She joined the Inquisition and suddenly, everything changed.

So you met the templar again in the Chantry of Haven after ten years of trying to forget him. He doesn't hate you. But how could that be? "Only mages are so susceptible to the infernal whisperings
of the demons." The rumors that had reached you through the Pilgrims' Path of him had not been positive. Had he gone mad and slayed innocent apprentices? Why did he transfer to the one city in all of Thedas that was famous for violent mage subjugation practices? In any reunion between you two, you expected scorn, derision, hatred, maybe even a blade poised at your neck, ready to cut you down. But no, what you got was kind eyes and lingering touches that you had initially thought was a one-sided hyper-awareness but it turned out to be...

"I love you," he told her, underneath the red boughs that hung over the broken panels of the ceiling, translucent in the sunlight. They stood in one of the towers of the main gate, overlooking the western passage to Orlais, surrounded by four walls of stone. A trembling hand rested on her cheek, the other resting on her hip.

She didn't squirm away but neither did she mimic his gesture - her arms hung loosely at her side as she stared at his painfully open expression. His words lit up a slow rising heat in her stomach that twisted and ached, "How? You..." She faltered as she tried to find words to use to convey an emotion that walked the line between confusion and want. "After the Ferelden Circle broke, after Uldred took you, you yourself said that a desire demon," She swallowed, involuntarily leaning into his touch as his thumb brushed over her tattoo markings, "had my face. I never faulted you for wanting distance away from everything." From the Circle Tower, from her - she didn't blame anyone except those who were responsible for the bloodshed, but that didn't mean that she didn't occasionally stare up at the skies and asked why everyone in her past that she had ever loved left her.

He didn't flinch when she brought up their past; she was unsure as to how to interpret the lack of reaction. "The demon was not you." She flinched; the hand on her hip tightened, "It took me ten years to realize the truth - her deception was skin deep, nothing more." Not her eyes, not her laugh, not her words, not her heart, "Forgive me," the corners of his mouth quirked upwards in a rueful smile, "I did not mean to keep you waiting."

"I wasn't," she replied, a bit too quickly, a bit defensive, "Maybe a little," she conceded when he gave her a leveled stare, shifting her weight from foot to foot as heat crept up her neck and onto her face, "But I didn't hope for much. People change in ten, eleven years. The world changed since then. How can you be sure that you still love in the same manner?" A large part of her cannot believe that she still held his heart since the Ferelden Circle fell; an even larger part of her cannot believe that she unknowingly had his heart years before since her apprentice days.

His arms shifted around, pulling her closer to him. She did not object to the embrace, instead reveling at the heat emanating from his arms, tucking her head into the crook of his neck: citrus, armor polish, Cullen. "The qualities that make you Amell and not anyone else hasn't changed," he murmured as her hands clenched, each gathering a fistful of his mahogany shirt. "You are still you... Sorry. I am not being very eloquent here," he smiled sheepishly, "I hope you understand?" She hummed in assent, hiding a barely there smile into his skin as an inexplicable fondness welled up within her. Likewise, the intrinsic qualities that made up Cullen had not changed like his titles: Ser, Knight Captain, or Commander.

She lightly shivered as the mountain winds blew in through the windows. He pulled her closer until she was flush against his body, his rhythmic breaths against the sensitive skin of her ear lulling her into a state of complacency bordering on sleep. "I care for you," she said, reluctantly leaning back to properly address him. Everything about him burns - his eyes sears, his touch brands. "but it has been ten years and love is not... I'm not there yet. But, I think I will be," and that was the most she could promise him.

If she was feeling poetic, she would say that her love is like a tree. The roots had to first extend down into the dirt before the branches could radiate outward in the sky, before the leaves could flourish and
the flowers could bloom. It needed time to grow. "I will wait," he nudged her closer to the point that if she wanted more, she only had to turn her head and lean forward to close that last gap of intimacy between them.

"You shouldn't have to. It's not fair to you." The farewell kiss that she had given him in the Chantry at Haven was a regret of what could have been. She had honestly thought that the battle would be the last of her. But she was alive - she had a second chance. His heart was in her hands; she could feel the devotion pouring from it in waves. It thrilled and terrified her in turns. Though time's tribulations have not changed their base natures, she could see how the intangible cracks and scars trailed through his soul - the lines from the raking claws of demons was one of the many that she could identify. They are both fragile beings.

"It's not too much trouble," he insisted, "I can afford to wait a bit longer." He let his forehead rest on hers, "What happened at Haven would not happen again. I will not allow it. I'll make this work." He pressed his lips to the thin, sensitive skin of her wrist, branding the promise into her veins; she shivered. "If you need time, I will make time."

They stayed in that position for a few minutes, neither feeling the need to be the first to extricate themselves from the other's hold. Yet, the duties of the Inquisition called for them both and when someone knocked on the door that lead to the walkway of the main atrium, Cullen sighed and called the visitor in. Amell reluctantly stepped back but kept their fingers linked together, watching as the slow procession of men and women carrying in tools and supplies and furniture, as the dilapidated room slowly turned into an office fitting for the Commander of the Inquisition.

"Chess later tonight?" He asked her after the last of the workers dropped their heavy loads along the far walls and departed with a low bow, as she opened the doors leading to the battlements.

"Of course. When have I ever said no?" she leaned up and kissed his cheek, "As long as you prepare the board, Commander."
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

From the Ashes

Cole

There is a delirious man lying on thin bedding, shrouded from the hurts of broken ribs and pierced organs by a thick haze of witherstalk. He feels no pain. His armor, regulation forest-green hunter outfit, has been stripped off, exposing a bandaged torso and pooling red to the winter wind. He is not cold. The surgeon, harried and exhausted from continuous days of failed treatments, has moved him outside the medical tents to die. He stares blankly at the cloudless sky.

Cole watches the pen in his hand craft a letter on vellum, dictated in flashes of potent love and fatigued acceptance. *My darling. Though my only desire is to hold you in my arms one last time before I fade into the Beyond, I am happy that you are not here to witness the horrors that have attacked Haven. I implore you not to cry: I have cried enough for both of us. If only there had been more time. Alas, the Maker has enforced his will. I accept and fear my fate. My sacrifice, I hope, contributed to a greater good.*

The man's voice quiets. Death is warm flesh turning into wax, a silence that leaves no echo; it lifts no burdens and leaves no corporeal soul. Cole folds the vellum into a small square and places it in the man's limp hand, curling the fingers over the note. Then, he moves on.

Many gather at the small altar by the gardens, framed by Andrastian banners and red candles - one for every dead. Hot red wax drips with emotional pain - they cry, tempering grief with faith. The Fade-sensitives (too close to the rifts - the portals force a second vision if ones stares too long) watch him with eyes and tears: they see earthy tones donned on a gaunt boy and a wide-brimmed hat. Then, they look away.

"He is a spirit," Solas says, his eagerness to share his knowledge as strong as the lock on his secrets. Solas is an elf mage with a shadow of a wolf. Solas is the shedding of self into waves of grief, the realization that there is only one path he would allow himself to take and that the path was lined with bones. Solas is good intentions done badly. "His arrival into our world predates the Breach. I would guess that he's been living among us for months, perhaps even years."

"He is a demon," Vivienne retorts, arms crossed, a thin barrier dances over her wrists. Her magic jumps at his slightest movements. She will not hesitate to strike if he steps too close. Her hostility is motivated by fear. She is right to be worried.

"I don't think I am a demon," Cole tells Amell. "But I am dangerous," he insists as he slowly tilts a cup of water against the parched lips feverish soldier. The drink tastes of an oasis in the Western Approach. *Thank you. You don't know me, but I know you. Rhys's mother and the Left Hand thought about you.*

She tilts her head to the side – remembering a lined face, white hair, and stern eyes. In a secret drawer of her desk, there is an old invitation to a funeral wake that she hadn't been able to attend. Thin smoke rose from her lit candles - they were not the ashes of her body, but she pretended that
they were. "Wynne and Leliana?" She asks as they duck into a medical tent.

"A sacrifice fit for a mother. She hoped that Faith would be enough for she had nothing else to give to a son she doesn't know." Turning around, he kneels down next to a civilian that breaths shallowly from the pain of her recent amputation. The smith is designing a leg of obsidian frame wrapped in velveteen. It will be offered to her when she wakes. "I am in the letters they wrote. I was unwritten."

Her magic curiously probes his back. He hears the song of waves hitting the high basalt column cliffs of the Storm Coast. "Why wouldn't they mention you?" Her hand waves over a bandaged stump that used to be a leg. A blue tendril of magic from her open palm snakes around the wound site, glowing faintly. Though the bleeding stays sluggish, the patient's breaths slow as she descends into a fitful sleep.

"I made them forget." He replies as they move to the next tent. "It's easier to make people forget when they have more important things to say. Empty puppets can be given new vitality. She sends the knowledge out to those she thinks care and can help. But the knowledge does not travel far: the rebellion had already begun." They stand at the foot of a low cot where another man waits. Cole smells a black miasma of rot - the scout's eyes are open but he sees nothing.

A dagger slips down his sleeve and into his waiting hand. He shifts into the reverse grip, preparing to strike at the neck. Her hand wraps around his wrist; he can feel her pulse - he wonders if she feels the lack of his. "He has only a few hours left. The surgeon cannot do more. It hurts to live. Maker, strike me where I lie."

"Cole." She pulls him back. *Compassion still embraces mercy killing. Andraste's flaming sword, I should not be the one to make moral judgment calls. Even so... "Stop."*

"I hear his voice," he protests but allows himself to be guided out of the tent. "He wishes for death."

She shakes her head, "You only hear one part of him." *The mind is a place of conflict. He can wish and fear death. He can despair and hope.* "You said there's still a few hours left. More supplies and escorted professionals are expected at noon. More healers. Wait till then." She looks skyward at the rising sun and then at Cole who shrinks under her gaze. "This world doesn't deal in absolutes - it's not the Fade."

He picks at the bandaged handle of his dagger and asks after a considerable silence, "Is that why spirits turn into demons in this world?" Was it inevitable? Vivienne thinks so. Solas does not. "Do you think I'll be one? I want to stay and help."

Amell thinks of Anders and Justice, of Wynne and Faith, of Desire and Envy and Despair and Pride. In the end, she smiles, tips the brim of his hat back: *Not a demon, not yet: and promises,"I'll make sure that won't happen."*

**Iron Bull**

Two serpents and two songs: a middling hand that had the potential to turn into a set of three if he could just somehow entice Sera to give up her card of mercy. An hour into the game and he suspected that the blasted elf had palmed a half of the deck and the Vint had palmed the other. It was times like these where he regretted the lack of casual shirts in his closet. There was a reason why rogues wore sleeves, or, if not sleeves, gloves. Herald's Rest murmured with hushed voices and the crystal clinking of glass and silverware. The rhythmic thumps made by Boss's mabari, a tail hitting against the wooden stool he was perched on, hadn't stopped since Dorian had shuffled and dealt.
Boss returned from the bartender with a tankard of honey mead and slid into the space between Dog and Sera, content to watch this round.

The table was full of small pieces of torn vellum with hastily scribbled down favors. "No more bees in the training dummies," Sera's handwriting promised - beneath the words was a small caricature of a man that looked suspiciously like Commander Cullen sprinting away from an angry swarm. Hidden among the slips of paper were Dorian's best razor, Sera's small torsion wrench and S-rake pick, and Bull's best spoon (a strange gift from Boss - she had insisted that it was a maul).

A few minutes later, Sera smirked and flipped the angel of death face-up onto the table. With wary anticipation, the four of them laid out their hand. Iron Bull leaned back into his chair and breathed out, a small grumble of discontent escaped his throat. Nearby patrons glanced up from their drinks in mild alarm before returning back to their conversations. Here is a joke that only Fereldens would understand: a qunari, a Vint, a city elf, and a mabari sit down at the bar and play cards. The mabari wins.

Boss gave a low whistle of appreciation. Groaning, Dorian allowed his head to fall into his hands as Sera cursed a storm of expletives that would've made an Orleisan noble faint. Dog barked happily as he stood on his haunches, leaned across the table, and nosed the entire pot to his side. "You don't wear sleeves either," Iron Bull peered at the mabari, nonplussed, as Dog started sorting through his loot.

"How?" Dorian asked, agast. "How does...

"I'll tell you how," Sera muttered darkly. "The mabaris I played with in Denerim always had tells. He's got none, always bloody happy about every bloody hand." Iron Bull rather thought that the Vint's shock came not from how much smarter Dog was compared to other mabaris but from the fundamental fact that mabaris were capable of playing Wicked Grace. For his mistake in humorizing their newest player, Dorian lost all of his pocket money save for three coppers and the remaining pieces of his grooming kit. Crossing her arms, Sera glared at their new winner, "Gonna flip this table over if you keep smiling at me like that" Dog angled his head to the side, trying to look congenial. "Arse. What can you even do with a shaving blade and a giant spoon anyways?"

"He'll give them back if you promise him belly rubs and playtimes with his favorite stick." Boss serenely answered as she sipped her drink. She tugged at the cotton scarf wrapped around her neck, loosening it to more of a cowl than a constriction. "At least you didn't bet your clothes. Things would've gone differently." Bull snorted in amusement. The number one unspoken rule of Wicked Grace was that one must never bet clothes unless one was willing to walk the rest of the day feeling the wind on their bits.

"You're speaking from experience." He observed, rubbing his chin and waving a nearby waitress down for more drinks, slipping more than enough coins into her hand. Dog was just about finished sorting his prizes into two piles, lined up in order of value perceived by their previous owners. Dorian gathered the cards and began shuffling the deck.

Boss scratched Dog's ear as she took on a mock-sage air, "The image of Alistair in nothing but his smalls, begging Dog for his pants and armor back, is not one to be easily forgotten." Dog barked in agreement. After pushing one of the two piles before her with his paw, he licked her hand and jumped off his stool, curling his large body around her feet, and fell asleep. After silently counting how many sovereigns she had before her, she raised a bemused eyebrow. "Well, he's certainly feeling generous today." She mused and then rapped her knuckles against the wood of the table, "Deal me in, Dorian. Maybe you can partially recover from your losses."

Maryden sang I am the One by the fireplace, her voice danced across the wooden floors, over
people's heads, up the stairs, drifting into the open courtyard of Skyhold. Bull offered a story of valor and heroics where he and his Chargers saved a village by fighting against fifty bandits and being paid in rice. Through the window, he spotted Krem still being debriefed by Scout Harding about their most recent excursion to the northeast sections of the Western Approach. Boss recounted a tale of chasing down nugs around Orzammar and how the Spymaster tried to carry one in her cleavage as their party moved back to base camp.

She still wore the disguise that Bull had lent her: a threadbare scarf, low key mercenary garb, skin-tone powder to cover her facial markings, and a small whispered illusion spell to conceal her grey eyes - with a slight slouch in her stance and an absence of the smooth gait that she usually adopted, she suddenly became a nondescript face among many, so long as no one looked too closely.

He had taken her to parts of the fortress, outdoor gatherings, that were heavily occupied by the lower ranks of the Inquisition: recruits and veterans, common and noble, both proud to serve. They offered to buy drinks for whoever was willing to set aside time for small talk - loose tongues were willing to answer hard questions. Alcohol spilled over glass rims and watered the grass.

Iron Bull was a mercenary-for-hire that had joined the organization solely for financial gain; Boss was a simple tag-along who could barely string two words together.

"Why did you join the Inquisition?"

There were many ways to frame the answer - at first glance, the reasons given varied like apples and oranges. Former Guard-Captain Mira had witnessed the Inquisitor fearlessly confronting the Elder One. Recruit Tanner had seen the recruitment posters that had made their way to Jader. Some had tragic pasts linked to the mage-templar war and were sick of pointless bloodshed. Others had made their way to Haven in hopes of gaining religious enlightenment and meeting the Herald of Andraste in person.

Upon closer inspection and deeper thought, one could summarize all the answers into one sentence: "I want to do good." The Inquisition offered that chance.

The scouts and soldiers departed one by one to their duties, leaving behind farewells and promises to socialize later. Boss stamped at the embers of the fire and ran a trembling hand through her hair as she watched the red coals fade to black. The pair of them pushed through the crowds, brushed shoulders with men and women distracted by their own engagements. Iron Bull gently guided her, a hand on her elbow, to the south side of the tavern where less people milled about.

"That wouldn't have happened if I hadn't looked like this," she later gestured downward, wiping her palms against the green cloths that peaked out of her chain mail, "They always gave the Herald a wide berth - as if it was sin to touch someone so holy without explicit permission." She glanced through the tavern window with a small smile: wistful and melancholic. "An Inquisitor. The Inquisitor," she corrected herself after a beat, "Now they'll probably be terrified to even glance in my direction."

"I'm sure it won't become that extreme, Boss." The tavern emanated a warm, yellow glow. His chargers were piled together on the far table, each too exhausted from their recent mission to walk back to their barracks, each fast asleep in comically uncomfortable positions. "You can always rely on Sera to bring you back down to earth. She'll be happy to help."

"Sera is Andrastian. But yeah, she still treats me normally," she shook her head and cleared her throat, "Alistair would be so proud. He's already sent me letters laughing at
my predicament - that I'm essentially a ruler of two arlings." Then, smile sliding off her face like water, she grimaced, "I didn't realize that the religious veneration would be so hard to tolerate."

He raised an eyebrow, "You're fine with the changes?" and frowned when she wordlessly shrugged. While every high ranking member of the Inquisition had the weight of responsibility on their backs, her burdens as the leader, the decision maker, and the religious figure were nearly physical. It was a miracle that she was still able to stand straight.

"I'll get used to it, like I get used to everything else, given enough time," she rubbed her face, smearing the face concealer onto her bandages, revealing the faint outline of her tattoos: geometric lines stretched down her cheeks in a mimicry of her family crest. "Everyone else is OK with this. All of you think I'm suited. Even my wardens think I'm suited." She gestured wildly at the space before her, "You know what Nathaniel did when Leliana told him I was alive after Haven? He sent me a care package: a bag of pickled fish from the Waking Sea and fresh dog biscuits - so I 'won't forget the nostalgic smell of home' since I'm 'obviously not going to be returning any time soon.' And then he wished me the best. I think he saw me becoming Inquisitor before I did. Honestly, that man," she rolled her eyes, "at least he's doing well in my absence. The others respect my second-in-command. Nothing has burnt down," she paused, "yet."

Iron Bull inclined his head in thought. Her wardens weren't just nameless subordinates serving underneath her - they were her friends. "Your command over the wardens is different than your rule over the Inquisition," he clarified.

"A bit," she conceded, smoothing down her front, "As Warden-Commander, everything is more personal. Like you and your chargers, I've handpicked my men and women. But here, all these strangers," she waved a hand, encompassing the entire population of Skyhold. Everyday activities for the everyday man - normality eases away wariness like an elfroot balm. "The blind faith and zeal attached to spiritual leaders has always made me uneasy. But I feel better now that I met them and, well," this time, her smile reached her eyes, "what you showed me was nice."

"Just thought I'd help." He opened the tavern door for her; she slipped in and whistled for her mabari. In response, a series of barks originated from the stairs, growing steadily louder. "It's better if you can place faces to the people who believe in you and the people who you save. You're not alone."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, patting her knee as her dog bounded happily down the stairs and into her open arms, "thanks, Bull."

Varric walked into the tavern almost an hour later and immediately spotted their small group in the corner. Dorian offered a curt nod, a bit mollified now that he won his shaving kit back from Boss - though Bull was willing to bet a good coin that she had let him win them back because she couldn't bear to see his mustache wither from neglect. Sera was preoccupied in haggling for the return of her belongings.

("I'll make cake. The Ferelden ones - with all the butter and sugar," Sera wheedled and cajoled, tugging at the mabari's lone ear. Dog made an inquiring noise. "No cookies.")

Boss gave a casual two-finger salute as the dwarf approached, "Hey Varric, are you ready to go?" She asked as she polished off the last of her drink.
Varric offered a thumbs up, "Straight up to the battlements." He confirmed, "would be better if we avoided the training grounds. I saw Seeker there. I think she's onto me."

"Right," Boss winced in sympathy, "Right. Just let me change into something a bit nicer first," she pushed her stool back, tugging at the scarf, "Pity," she murmured as she made her way to the door, reluctant to part with the anonymity that came from the borrowed clothes, "They were beginning to grow on me."

An awkward stillness began to settle over the table. With Boss gone, Sera and Dog still in the middle of negotiations, the only other available person at the table to talk to was the Vint and as much as Bull wished otherwise, their conversations without a third party buffer haven't evolved past the haltingly given awkward greetings. Between them were two small glasses that the waitress had failed to pick up - and... Well... Good liquor loosened tongues. It was an idea at least. Inwardly shrugging, Iron Bull pulled out his canteen, meant for water, but instead contained Mackay's Epic Single Malt (older than the Maker and smoother than elven baby-butt). He poured a finger into each glass, and silently offered one. Dorian eyed the gift like it was magebane but accepted the token of friendship. "Another round?" Iron Bull gestured at the card deck in the other man's hand.

After a beat, Dorian pinched the bridge of his nose, sighed, and began to shuffle once again.

**Hawke**

When the first stories of the Hero of Ferelden conquering the Fifth Blight had reached him in Kirkwall, he had pictured someone who vaguely resembled Aveline, standing tall in the face of her enemies. When he had heard from his mother that the Hero of Ferelden was his second cousin, he pictured someone like Bethany, effortlessly taking down hurlocks and genlocks with her magic. When Varric's letters had described the Hero of Ferelden, a woman who bore a likeness to him in looks and action, he envisioned an odd combination of traits: his head on Isabela's body, striking the final blow against the Archdemon.

...Let it be known that his imagination was not one of his better qualities.

He assumed that she must have also been trying to place a face onto a name and title due to the amount of curious intensity in her eyes (grey - just like his). She tilted her head to the side, "you're awfully muscular for a mage," she remarked in a dubious tone, gaze slowly wandering from his face down to his arms.

Hawke blinked. That was not the greeting or tearful reunion he had expected and dreaded in equal amounts. Varric, the ever faithful best friend, was stifling his laughter behind a closed fist. He leaned back against the walls of the parapets and flexed the clawed gauntlet that encased his right hand, "Its the result of a good twenty or so years of chopping firewood and wrestling pigs in Lothering."

"Lothering?" She echoed, both eyebrows raised in surprise, "You lived there before Kirkwall?" She blinked, "...Huh. We might have unknowingly crossed paths then. I stopped by right after the Battle of Ostagar to reach the Imperial Highway." Hawke mimicked her expression of bemusement. Maybe the story that Bethany had told the Hawke family right before they escaped into the Kocari Wilds, how she had stumbled upon a brawl between wardens, Loghain's soldiers, and a Chantry Sister at Dane's Refuge, meant that she had caught a glimpse of her cousin. The thought made him smile. "Varric never told me about your humble farm boy origins."

"Flashing a grin at Varric, Hawke blithely explained, "Humble doesn't fit into Varric's literature. Once he writes your story, you'll notice how he tends to embellish certain details," like the fact that his first
meeting with the dwarf was not as suave as his biography portrayed it to be. In fact, no one, not Varric, Hawke, or Carver, had managed to catch the thief that had made off with all of their money pouches. (And the first words that Varric had said to him were, "Andraste's sagging tits. I'll get that bastard one day. ...Hey, you. Want to drown your sorrows with me at The Hanged Man?")

"I didn't hear you complain when I sent you my manuscripts," Varric grumbled in good humor, stuffing his hands into his coat pockets. Hawke playfully nudged his shoulder.

"Not a complaint - more of an observation," chuckling under his breath, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a well-leafed through copy of Tale of the Champion. "Your manuscripts are lovely." Its edges were frayed and flecked with dirt, the spine was decorated in old blood stains. He had received the gift from a courier a few weeks after fleeing Kirkwall. It could not have come at a better time - after a lifetime of being surrounded by friends and family, loneliness in the Free Marches wilderness had hardened quickly around him like ice, constricting his usual cheer. Varric's book harked back to the bygone days, a little bit of happiness that he could keep at his side.

"Those plot elements work well in his fictional serials like Hard in Hightown. His biography... Yeah, not so much." She mused, drumming her fingers on the stone, eyes bright with jest, "Though I did find the whole groups-of-bandits-falling-out-of-the-sky trope absolutely hilarious."

The author in question rolled his eyes, "Instead of criticizing my writing style, maybe there should be more focus on the reason why I brought you two together." Hawke and Amell exchanged glances and turned towards him in eerie synchronicity. Not in the least bit fazed, he buffed his nails against his tailored coat, muttering, "And you know the world is ending when Varric Tethras has to steer the conversation to the serious matters." He clasped his hands together, "But where are my manners? I haven't even done the introductions yet."

"That's because we don't need them," Hawke pointed out.

Varric dismissed the comment with a careless wave. "It's the principle of the matter." He cleared his throat, putting on obvious airs, "Hawke. Your Inquisitorialness."

She offered a lopsided grin when they shook hands. "Amell is fine too, cousin," she added before launching straight into business.

*These days, you just can't trust your enemies to stay dead. Corypheus looked the same as ever, though less deranged and more vindictive. He also has a dragon, which, of course, an evil guy like him would have a dragon, wouldn't he? Varric had written in his most recent letters - handwriting more elegant and compact now that he had an actual escritoire to work on. Try not to get too nervous when you meet her - just be yourself. I think the two of you will get along like a house on fire.*

It was very hard to find people in this world who shared his kind of humor, who employed comedy and wit as a palliative against the tragic events that constantly cropped up around him like giant spiders - but she was one of the few. He wondered - What if Aunt Revka had raised her children as apostates? Would she have tried to contact his parents for assistance? Would his second cousins have been childhood friends? It was an interesting thought - pity that the actual family reunion had to occur under such distressing circumstances.

Hawke knelt over the scattered papers, opened books, and scrolls with a pen in hand. Amell sat cross-legged, muttering under her breath as she skimmed over his account of Corypheus in the Warden's Prison. Varric read over her shoulder, adding his own two coppers of what he could recall of traversing through the tower. Hawke leaned back, groaning as stiff joints creaked and popped;
squinting upwards, he hazarded a guess that they've been sitting under the sun for at least three hours consolidating their information. Despite combing through the Vimmark Mountains and his father's journals after his self-imposed exile from Kirkwall, there was no additional facts to offer to the Inquisition - a darkspawn magister, a high priest of Dumat - nothing explaining how he had survived the fight against Hawke and his companions.

"If he had taken Senior Warden Janeka as a host." Amell guessed, rubbing her brows, thumbs pressing against her temples, "then it's not the dragon that has the traits of an Archdemon, it's Corypheus. Fantastic." She shook her head, expression grim, "I knew of an old ritual that could prevent an Archdemon's soul from escaping once its body dies - I don't know how effectively it can be applied here. If Warden-Commander Clarel hadn't gone mad, I would've asked her for assistance," she made a frustrated sound, waving a hand over the strewed material, "A Demon army. Who in their right mind thinks that a demon army is the solution to anything?"

"We'll need to first find the wardens' command post. Stroud would know where." Hawke leafed through a couple sheets of loose vellum, "The good news is that I managed to decipher his code and pin down the general location of his hideout. The bad news is that a couple of our messages were intercepted. If we meet any wardens in Crestwood, I don't think they would be willing to cooperate with the Inquisition, especially if they knew that you intend to challenge Clarel."

Her eyes took on the shade of cold steel, "They dare. I'm not their Commander but I am a Commander," she murmured, flexing her left hand as fade magic leaked through her bandages, "Actually," she tapped a finger on a correspondence between her and Clarel, smiling bitterly, "some of the wardens were my own. They defected to her side after the Calling began to influence the older veterans. Clarel thought that the remaining Old Gods were waking. She wanted to kill them before they even exited the Deep Roads. I thought the quest would end in meaningless deaths. But not all of my people agreed." She slowly stood, dragging her palms over her face, "they thought that I wouldn't be able to save the organization. If I had known what she was planning to do-

"You hadn't known," Varric insisted, "It's not your fault."

"It hurts," she admitted, voice muffled by her hands, "I know them." Taking a few breaths to regain her composure, she said, "If we meet the wardens in Crestwood and if I try to bring them to heel, we'll run the risk of ruining any chance of cooperation."

For the next few minutes, the three of them silently gathered and organized their notes. Tightly rolling up the last scrolls, Hawke straightened, brushing dirt off the hem of his shirt, "Alright. We don't engage the wardens unless they have Stroud. I trust Carver not to do anything foolish, like suddenly deciding that he can take on the entire organization on his own, just before we manage to find them. He always had the best timing." Then, he froze as something occurred to him. "Oh," He turned towards Amell, "I forgot to mention - Carver is with Stroud. You haven't met Carver yet, have you?"

"Your brother?" She crossed her arms and shook her head, "The few times I met Stroud, he was alone." Curiosity flickered across her features, pushing aside her grief and sorrow, "Stroud didn't tell me that he had a companion. Do you think Stroud told him about us?" She paused, frowning in thought, "Does he even know that we're coming to rescue them?" After a beat, Hawke burst into laughter.

Varric shared the merriment. "Poor Junior," he snickered behind a hand, "A surprise family gathering? He'll be horrified."

"What?" Amell started, eyes widening in consternation, "why?"
Still chortling, Hawke leaned over to squeeze her shoulder, "We're a bit too alike. Carver is," he struggled a bit to find the words, "Carver is the little brother you never wanted but always needed."

"With a chip on his shoulder the size of his mabari tattoo," Varric added, wiping away a tear, still chuckling.

Amell still didn't seem to understand the humor and only looked increasingly confused. "I mean - I'm happy to know that he's out there. Alive. There's at least three of us."

"Five," Hawke corrected her, "But you might not want to count Uncle Gamlen. Man's a shameless gambler, drinker, and a regular at The Blooming Rose. His daughter, Charade, is much better company." Charade was the new owner of the Amell estate - what she chose to do with the family fortune was entirely at her discretion. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, "we Hawkes and Amells watch out for one another like family, but being family doesn't stop us from making fun at each other's expense."

She chewed on her bottom lip in thought and then happily beamed. "Oh. Ok," her skin markings shifted with her change in expression. As a circle mage, the concept of familial love must have been completely alien and unattainable. The smallest proof that she had a family that would've unconditionally loved her would have been her most priceless treasure, guarded jealously from the templars who tried to remove any of her connections to a possible life outside the tower. To trust someone so much to give that treasure away...

As a farewell, I had gifted my pendant to a friend whom I hold dear to my heart. Since then, I not sure if he even kept it. Frankly, I'm too scared to ask. The circumstance surrounding us is a bit of a sensitive subject and to bring it up might invite more painful memories. I guess that's why I decided to mark my face in a pattern that resembled the Amell crest - you can't loose something that is embedded in your skin. Make no mistake, I don't regret my decision - I just... He hasn't said anything about it. - She had written in one of her earlier letters.

It wasn't like Hawke was completely ignorant about the relationship between his cousin and former Knight-Captain Cullen : with the rumors circulating Kirkwall about the reasons behind the Ferelden templar's transfer, Varric's stories, Amell's letters, and the man himself - except... It wasn't speculation anymore. It was truth - and Hawke would be lying if he claimed that he didn't develop some degree of protectiveness over her in the little time that they got to know each other - she was about the same age as Carver... And Bethany, if she had still been alive. - After much deliberation, Hawke decided to wait until she had gone on an expedition to the Exalted Plains before searching Skyhold for the Commander of the Inquisition and...

Cullen worked through his assignments with frightening efficiency - missions, orders, soldier movements, training, and requisitions all stacked in neat little piles, determinedly ignoring the other man. Hawke suspected that his regular communications with Aveline via letters dripped with equal amounts of exasperation and inexplicable fondness had transferred some of the Guard Captain's skill of 'Hawke-wrangling.' ("Should you ever meet him, be wary of what piques his interests," she might have warned, "and do not encourage his jokes. If you must follow him into whatever adventure he sets out on, do so with caution. He is fond of force magic. If he likes you, he will be polite enough to warn you two seconds before he casts his fire spells.")

With his boots were propped up on a unused corner of the Commander's workspace, Hawke balanced on two chair legs, hands folded in his lap as he stared at the ceiling. The two men had already exhausted all of their safe conversation topics: the recent news from Kirkwall and... Yeah,
that's about it. Hawke would rather have jars of bees dropped on him than delve into any hot water: the Amell family crest and the fact that the Commander's hands had a sort of tremor that he hasn't seen since he had met Samson in Lowtown (whatever that former templar was getting himself into, at least he isn't suffering from lyrium withdrawal) being one of the few untouchable matters at hand.

But he had came to the Commander's office with a purpose and he was not doing himself any favors delaying the inevitable conversation. Well. He scratched his beard. This is going to be spectacularly awkward. Hawke cleared his throat, "So," he dragged out the word as the sound of the pen nib scratching on vellum slowed and stopped, "Isabela once told me that she believed that the reason why Kirkwall templars were so disturbed and paranoid was because of the widespread popularity of taking vows against physical temptations. It's an an unusual trend since it never took hold in the other circles, from what I had heard on my travels."

"One of your acquaintances? The pirate captain? And she believes that she is deeply versed in the relationship intricacies between templars and circle mages?" The Commander sighed, massaging the bridge of his nose, fatigue evident in the deep circles around his eyes, "Are you actually taking her word seriously? That is most certainly not a viable reason as to why the Kirkwall Circle treated their mages poorly."

Hawke leaned forward, a dull thud echoed in the office as he righted himself. "No. It's definitely not. But, her comment got me thinking - that if the Chantry can boldly hand out rules that control a templar's private life, then to what extent can the Chantry influence?" He gave a low whistle, "What do they teach to make someone think that in order to fully accept the Maker, one must swear to be chaste for the rest of his or her life? I'd go mad."

"Maybe so - the sermons in Kirkwall did put particular emphasis on resisting physical temptations," Cullen shuffled some papers, "But it's not as common as you would think. I never made those vows." And then he froze, suddenly realizing that he had said that last sentence out loud to someone who would capitulate on his admission.

Hawke tapped his fingers together, "And if I may ask why you didn't?"

"I knew an Amell once. She was a special woman. Never met her like again."

The other man's ears started to flush at the tips. "We," Cullen said wearily, eyes resolutely trained on the missives lying before him as he refilled his pen reservoir, "are not discussing this any further."

"You weren't one of the templar regulars at The Blooming Rose - Isabela would've seen you." Hawke continued as if the other man hadn't spoken, "Did you hope eventually for a happier life with a lover to greet you in bed every night?" Cullen resolutely looked down at his papers, refusing to answer. Still, with every verbal push, the man stiffened further, growing more taut, teeth clenched together so hard that a pulse jumped at his jawline, "A warm body under you? A warm body over you? A sweet mouth? Shapely curves? Soft hands?" He spread out his hands, "You're a man with needs, after all. Or," Hawke tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, "Or is it one woman in particular that you desire?"

To his credit, he did not jump when the inkwell shattered in Cullen's hand, stained glass falling onto the desk and ground, black following soon after, dripping between the gloved fingers and onto the reports. Cursing softly under his breath, Cullen stood, head bent down and away from the light, trying in vain to prevent the spill from spreading further.

Hawke silently looked down at the ink slowly seeping through the floor boards and then back up at the Commander who was blankly staring at the mess. He hadn't expected such an outburst: some blushing and stammering at most - perhaps he had grossly miscalculated the amount of tension in the
"What do you want me to say, Hawke?" Cullen snarled, hands gripping at the edges of the desk, hard enough that the wood was beginning to loudly protest under the pressure, "It's obvious that you already know. Would it please you if I bare my heart and admit it out loud?" His fist impacted the desk, causing nearby papers to fly, "Yes, Amell is the reason why I never took the vows. Yes, I want her."

Hawke raised an eyebrow, his gaze taking on a more curious tone, "You are awfully tetchy today, Commander" He observed, allowing some amusement to leak into his voice.

"You just-" Cullen faltered, his previous rush of anger dissipating as quickly as it had risen, exhaustion again filling the void. "Of course you would. You're Hawke." He sank back into his chair, a hand running through his hair as he struggled to regain his composure. "Please excuse me. My behavior was not acceptable," he apologized through gritted teeth, "it is due to lyrium stress."

"My fault for giving you the run around." Hawke conceded, "I'll get to the point," he blew out a long breath and shrugged, "I know my cousin had forgiven whatever unpleasantness has happened between you and her at the Ferelden Circle - you were in shock, you were traumatized, you needed time to heal. Fine." He crossed his arms, one finger running over his sigil marked on his upper left arm, "But she didn't see you in Kirkwall. I did. And whether you were still recovering or not, you were part of the mess. Though you questioned the Annulment and eventually helped me stop Meredith, I remember your stance in the mage-templar debate and what you had said."

"Mages cannot be treated like people. They are not like you and me. They are weapons. They have the power to light the city on fire in a fit of pique."

After pulling off his gloves, Cullen buried his face in his hands. "I was wrong," he said after a few moments of strained silence, "I was drowning in my own vitriol and hate and I believed that I was doing right. I shadowed Meredith's footsteps - executing her policies because they seemed to be the only thing that kept the peace. But slowly, she had changed - or maybe she always had been mad but I was too blind to see." He leaned back in his chair, wiping a trembling hand across his brow, "her actions made me realize how cruel my own stance had become - it was not me - I thought I had become a monster like the abominations that took over the Ferelden Circle."

"And her?" Hawke gently prodded.

He laughed, bitter and wistful. "My last words to her in Kinloch Hold were aimed to inflict pain. I can only wonder why she decided to give me this second chance. I know how hard-earned and fragile her trust is," he rubbed the back of his neck, "I don't know what she sees in me. I swear I won't make the same mistake again. Or any. I'll take whatever she gives me."

Hawke sighed, fingers pressing into his temples, allowing the silence to hover between them for a good minute, "I don't have much family left. If you harm her, you will answer to me."

Cullen slowly blinked, "If I hurt her," he whispered, barely audible in the office, "I will do worse to myself than you possibly can."
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

From the Ashes

Cassandra

The sounds of Varric's boots scrapping down the rails as he descended the ladder to the lower floors did not dull the echo of accusations and pointed remarks he left behind. "Do you know why I didn't trust you?" He had yelled, ducking behind the table and flipping it over to take cover in case she decided to charge (and in her red-blinded rage, she had entertained the idea), "Because I kept wondering. Why didn't the Seekers come to Kirkwall when both the Tranquility rituals and the blood magic abuses just started? Why did the Seekers wait until the Chantry explosion and the attempted Annulment of the Circle?"

The banister protested under her crushing grip; her knuckles whitened as the remnants of her rage ceded into shame and resignation. "That's what I was trying to investigate and prevent!" she had shouted at his retreating figure that still lingered in the vestibule.

"And your people did an excellent job! Hawke is on the run because of the mage-templar war!" His hand pressed against his cheek, bleeding from flying splinters. "Hawke doesn't need anymore...

Varric took a deep breath and wiped the blood that was trailing toward the edge of his mouth with his sleeve. "I'm done here." Grimacing in disgust, he wiped his gloves against his duster and, shaking his head, stepped out into the courtyard.

The door slammed behind him; the wooden beam supports shuddered above her. Cassandra had thought that it was the Inquisitor's stare that burned like fire, grazing her skin through her armor, but when she turn around, she found that Amell's grey eyes were painfully empathetic and not at all condemning - maybe it was her own guilt that left the taste of ash on her tongue. "Nothing more to say?" Cassandra asked after a moment of silence, slightly bitter from the fact that the woman had mainly sided with the dwarf. It was understandable - Varric had reasons to be wary, Varric had lied to protect, Varric was not responsible for the tragedy at the Conclave.

Amell leaned back against the empty chestnut paneled bookcases that stood against the opposite wall, fingers idly tapping against the wood, "Why didn't you blame me?" She inquired, "I didn't tell you my correspondence with Hawke here or in Haven."

"You didn't know that I was still searching,' Cassandra replied as she sank into a chair, elbows on knees, armor rattling from her movements. "I did not tell you that I still hoped to contact him." She stared emptily ahead: spiderwebs connecting abandoned pieces of lumber and broken furniture, dark shadows where the mice dwelled, "And maybe my repeated follies have some pattern. I did not fully explain. Sometimes, truth is an exchange. If in Kirkwall, I had told Varric," her breath hitched, "if i had emphasized the fact that the Inquisition, the world, needed whatever Hawke was willing to offer." she sighed and crossed her legs, "but the Champion wouldn't have agreed to accepting the role of Inquisitor. He sided with the mages. He was a mage. As a Seeker, I would've not been the ideal person to recruit him"
"You're not the villain in his books, Cassandra."

"Then why do I feel like one?" She retorted, hands clenching and unclenching the fabric of her trousers, eyes tracing the dusty grain of the floorboards, "I understand why Varric hid his whereabouts. But I had thought that over time, when we became cordial... Was I wrong to expect honesty? I trust him."

Silently, Amell slid into a chair facing her, taking one of her hands and gently prying it open, turning it over to see where the splinters pierced her skin in her fury, where four neat crescent moons were imprinted into her palm. "You're seeing both sides of a conflict. Nothing purely right or purely wrong." Her other hand glowed with a faint blue light; superficial cuts slowly faded, "It's not as bad as you make it out to be." She added, leaning back, "Hawke is helping the Inquisition. And Varric," she brushed her hair back, "You might not see it, but Varric actually likes you. This," she waved her hand at the overturned table and the split railings, "was just something that needed to be said."

Cassandra bit her lower lip in thought, "I know their stories. I know their values." On her beside table was a copy of Tale of the Champion, with a knife-shaped hole extending from cover to cover, courtesy of her rough handed interrogation tactics. "If the Inquisition did not help the people, they would not stay here." She took a moment to appraise the other: lax body language, thin musculature, a carefree grin - she does not look like a Hero, a Herald, or an Inquisitor, and yet, "I am glad that you found us, however unintentional, despite the circumstances." Struggling to find the proper words, she admitted, "You are... not what I expected."

What Cassandra had expected when she had heard the Hero's exploits, was a pious woman, serious, steadfast, moralistic, strong in spirit and in faith. ("That's Wynne," Leliana had corrected.) Faith... She did not dare to presume. The beliefs of circle mages encompassed the entire range from zealot to nonbeliever. "Do you believe in the Maker?" she had asked as the gates to Hargrave Keep began to rise.

Amell glanced at the army of hostile Avvar tribesmen before them in the compound and then at the bigger army of corpse archers and warriors behind them. With a small twitch of the Inquisitor's wrist, Sera climbed to higher ground and Vivienne materialized her spirit blade from her hilt of lazurite and sapphires, slowly stalking towards the nearest foot soldiers. "People can still be good without being Andrastian," she answered measurably, throwing fireballs to thin out the dual enemy lines, "Would your opinion of me change if I said no?"

The edge of her shield caught against a man's jaw, flinging him back a couple paces. Amell slid into the her blind spot and froze a flanking duo with a cone of cold. "... No," Cassandra acquiesced.

"Did Leliana ever tell you the story of how we found the Sacred Ashes?" Her conversational tone contrary to the the battle-thirsty screams around them, "We had to answer riddles given by the spirits of Andraste's disciples. We walked through fire. The ashes healed Arl Eamon from near death. Those were miracles. So yes, I believe in Andraste." She pivoted and sliced through another two corpses, "I also believe..." she gritted her teeth as she parried a blow, "I also believe that the Maker is equal in his affection: mages and non-mages." She swung, "Now whether the Maker hates everyone or loves everyone, that is up to you to decide."

At the top of the steps, the Hand of Korth roared a challenge. As she nudged aside the bodies of the fallen, a small wisp of fire lit up in the palm of her hand, a spell resting on the tip of her tongue. Cassandra pursed her lips, shifted her grip on her sword and
shield, felt a barrier encompassing her armor, and rushed forward.

The dwarf was at his usual alcove by the door that led to the atrium, sitting on a stool and suffering from Garrett Hawke's fussing attentions. *(The Champion of Kirkwall is here? A part of her that greatly admired his deeds inwardly groaned; she never wanted him to think of her poorly. *Andraste, give me strength. Do not allow me to humiliate myself before him.* Outwardly, she was the calm before the storm.*) "Let it go, Hawke," he swatted at the roaming hands, "It's just a scratch. Besides, you're terrible at healing spells. If I had a copper for every time you tried to... Ahh." As Varric derailed from his sentence, Hawke's head snapped up, eyes narrowing as he spotted the Seeker walking purposely towards them with the Inquisitor following at a more sedated pace.

Stepping in front of Varric, feet at shoulder width, Hawke crossed his arms, "Seeker Cassandra. If you came to threaten -"

"I came to apologize," she stiffly announced.

"- doesn't mean that getting physical..." Hawke paused, belatedly digesting her words, and blinked, "Oh. Well," He awkwardly scratched his cheek with his gauntlet covered hand, "I had a long speech prepared too, was looking forward to using it. Pity." Sidestepping, he magnanimously waved towards the dwarf, "Carry on then." Cassandra brushed past him, "I'll just stay here, making sure that nothing else gets broken."

"Varric," she greeted, hands linking behind her back.

"Look," setting aside his makeshift ice-pack, he rubbed the back of his neck, "I asked myself many times after the Breach opened if I should have told you, if I should tell you, but it wasn't up to me."

Cassandra swallowed, "I went too far. My anger clouded my judgment." She twitched and shifted her weight from foot to foot. The admission was not easy to make. "I was searching for someone to blame."

Varric stared and sighed, "Cassandra." It would be the first and last time he would ever use her actual name, "I know I'm in the wrong here and the things I said about the Seekers were horrible and don't reflect on you. But at the same time," a pair of Orlesian nobles swept by, appraising behind their masks and fans, "if I had to do everything over again, I wouldn't change a thing. I won't ever betray Hawke."

"That's very touching, Varric," Hawke piped up from behind, "I'm going to swoon. Cousin, hold me."

"Shush. Don't interrupt the touching moment between the noble Seeker and the dwarven rogue with a heart of gold," Amell murmured in a mock narrative voice.

"Maker's brass balls." Varric threw his arms up in exasperation as Cassandra pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling justly mortified as both the Hero of Ferelden and the Champion of Kirkwall bantered at their expense, "You know what? I'll cut it short. Seeker. I accept your apology if you'll accept mine." He held out his hand, staring at her straight in the eye, "Put it all behind us?"

Was a handshake enough? Was it really that simple to resolve such a fight? She took the hand and, when Varric gave a wry grin, she thought: for him? Yes.

Cullen
It came, as it wont to do, without warning. It had been a few days since his last flare up and he had hoped, foolishly perhaps, that his symptoms had abated and that his long nights lying awake on top of his covers, tolerating the wracking aches with gritted teeth, had finally ceased. He had just finished marking on his map the troop movements expanding out from Skyhold like a spider's web, reaching as far as the Western Approach, sniffing out Venatori and Red Templar camps like packs of mabari hounds. Edicts in various draft forms had cluttered his desk, the finished ones sat in a neat pile at the corner of his desk, waiting to be retrieved by Lieutenant Rozellene. He had been briefly scanning a missive, frowning at the messy shorthand, when the familiar stabbing pain laced across his skull. He pressed his knuckles against the pressure points above his brows as the intangible fingers, claws, reached into his head and twisted...He stumbled back into his chair, hand blindly groping for the armrest as his vision began to blacken. Maker have mercy. Not now. But his pleas went unanswered and he knew he would not be relief, not when he could still hear the lauds drifting from the Skyhold gardens in one ear and the familiar, terrible, tantalizing whispers of demons in the other.

Desire wrapped her arms around him, digging her grip into the cloths that hung from his armor. Shadows of abominations, their grotesque heads brushing against the ceiling, stalked his peripheries, over the line dead templars that stretched down the curved halls of Kinloch Hold. He could hear their low baritone laughs as they glided away from his prison, striking at anyone that dared to oppose them. His fists slammed against the force field, his own screams mixing with those of his brethren.

He slowly roused himself awake, breathing in the scent of embrium and prophet's laurel, blindly turning toward the soft sounds of porcelain china on his left. A sensation of fire danced across his skin, dry and cracked, but did not push any deeper. A thick duvet was pulled up to his chest - someone had stripped him of his usual armor and outerwear. As his eyes adjusted to the light of the midday sun, he slowly registered the presence of someone working at his bedside. Seemly lost in her thoughts, Amell busied herself in her task of slowly pouring hot water through a sieve that held a small mixture of grounded herbs. She wore open neckline mage robes, revealing the small, fire opal pendant that rested at the divot of her collar bones. She faced the window at the side of the headboard, enjoying the small breeze that blew past her hair. The light created a light halo on her black hair, giving her profile an otherworldly air. He watched her intently, at her minute facial changes and the way her breath caught in surprise when he reached over and intertwined his fingers with hers. "Hello Cullen," she greeted, unresisting as he gently pulled her closer until she was sitting next to him, brushing shoulders and elbows.

"Yes, Amell is the reason why I never took the vows. Yes, I want her."

He wanted a lot of things from her: for her to fall into bed with him, for her laughing eyes to darken at the sight of him, for her mouth that always curled into an easy smile to press eagerly against his, for her hands to explore... He swallowed heavily and flushed when her lighthearted cheer turned into bemusement. "We weren't expecting you this week. When did you return?" The trek back from the Emerald Graves took the path that marked the border between the Frostback Mountains and the Dales was not an easy one to take.

"Late last night," she replied as she offered him a small cup. He pushed himself from his elbows upright into a sitting position to accept the tonic. "How do you feel?" She asked, pointedly lowering her gaze to his lightly trembling hands as he took a hesitant sip.

"Better." He sighed in relief, feeling liquid warmth seep into his numb bones, "Though I don't quite remember how I got here. You didn't undress me when I..." he trailed off awkwardly as her eyebrows raised and she raised a hand to poorly hide her mirth.
"Hawke found you this morning laid over your desk and brought in the healers and Cassandra. Cassandra then looked for me. So no, Commander, I haven't seen any more than what I am seeing now." As he set the empty cup on his stand, she reached up and carded her fingers through his hair. When he brook no protest, she coaxed a small wave of healing magic through her fingers, "You were in bad shape when I first arrived," her tone softened as he grew lax under her ministrations.

The voices were still there, driven to the very edges of his senses, replaced by the dull roar of the sea. The relief was temporary but still he welcomed her magic with a sigh as it trickled to the sensitive hairs at his nape. "I didn't wish to burden you with any further." Her duties as the Inquisitor and her struggle against the wardens' Calling left her exhausted at the end of most days. "It wasn't my intention to deceive and I don't think of you incapable of handling every problem that comes to you. I just didn't want to add to your work load." It wasn't an excuse. Professionalism dictated that he should've informed her the moment he made his decision to stop taking lyrium - unfortunately, professionalism wasn't the only attitude he had for her.

She shifted against him, "I wish you would've told me," she murmured, "Your mind can break. You can die."

"Dependency and addiction is not living. In order to fully break away from the Chantry and the Order, I had to let go of the only thing that was keeping me at their side," he whispered, "I tested the chains and I - and I found that my templar abilities are still strong even after a month of withdrawal."

She nodded thoughtfully, "Alistair still fought like a templar even after we stopped the Blight," she recalled, "eventually, a year or so without lyrium, the skills will disappear."

He fought down the familiar sting of jealousy that rose every time she said the king's name. "Nothing happened," Leliana had soothed him weeks ago when he had gathered the courage to visit her in the rookery and ask about the relationship between Amell and the ruler she placed on the Ferelden throne, "maybe Alistair had wanted something like I had wanted something. He received the same amount of affection as I."

"Why did the Chantry allow us to grow so dependent? Rarely does one decide to leave the order because of their stringent monitoring of the lyrium market. I want to break all ties. The Inquisition should have as much commitment as the order did, as Meredith did." He let out a heavy exhale, "Even after all the atrocities that I've witnessed," leaving behind invisible scars, "I still wish to serve."

"You are serving," she pointed out.

He extended a hand outward and watched it tremble, "Not now," not in his bedridden state, weak as a mabari pup. "I'm crippled by lyrium; I'm crippled without lyrium." The hand closed into a fist and dropped back onto the bedsheets, "I should be giving you reports. I should be telling you about Samson's operations in the Sahmnia Quarries, but instead, I've distracted you and," he allowed some frustration to leak into his tone, "Cassandra will not relieve me from my position."

"And I won't either." She said sharply. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and leaned back, "If this is what you want, you will not find any objections from me." She continued at a more subdued tone, "I will not find a replacement for you nor will I force lyrium down your throat."

"No. You wouldn't do that." He relaxed, eyes half-lidded as another wave of cooling magic rushed down his spine. "It's just frustrating. I know I can overcome this. You telling me that my choices are worth it does help. When I finally recover, you'll have my full devotion." He froze, "I mean, the Inquisition will have my full devotion," he quickly backtracked, "and you, of course. You are- you are also part of - but also out of - I hope to," and cut himself off, rubbing a hand against the back of
his neck, feeling his cheeks heat up. Instantly, he was reminded of all the times he had made a fool of himself in front of her ages ago when she was still an apprentice.

Her shoulders shook as she tried to stifle her laughter, "Oh Cullen," she sighed after she reigned herself in to some level of control, though the bright glint in her eyes told him that she was reliving the same memories as he was. "You're right. the Inquisition needs you." Her thumb brushed against the scar on his lip, she cleared her throat, turning a bit red, "But I need you too, selfish as that may seem." She stood, brushing down her front, "Take the rest of the day off. You are not in any shape or form fit for work. You'll start anew tomorrow. Alright?" He nodded; she leaned in and kissed his forehead. As she walked towards the ladder, he stared, transfixed, at the smooth sway of her hips with a yearning that churned hotly from his chest, until she descended down and out of sight.

"Or is it one woman in particular that you desire?" Hawke had asked a week ago in an attempt to unbalance him from his usual composed bearing. Cullen closed his eyes.

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His calloused fingers dragged across her stomach; she arched into his touch and his mouth, her own hand splayed across his chest, slowly sneaking to his back as she pulled his head down towards hers. His grip dug into the hollow of her hips as he lifted her and pinned her onto his desk. She seemed more amused than impressed.

"Maker preserve me," he groaned, letting his face fall into his open hands.

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**Josephine**

Josephine gave up when the headache building behind her straining eyes grew so intense that she had to blink to rid the black spots in her vision. Sighing, she set aside the copy of the assassin contract that the Du Paraquettes had taken out against anyone that attempted to reinstate the Montilyets back as a trading family in Orlais, kindly offered by Comte Boisvert. The deposition was easily the size of one of Varric's novels, words legally bounded so tightly that it was impossible for her to find any ways to maneuver past the House of Repose. She took a sip from her mug of tea, pressing her chilled fingers against the hot sides.

Across from her desk, sitting on cushioned upholstery, was Madame Vivienne and the Inquisitor, discussing the various people they were expecting to show at up at the Winter Palace at Empress Celene's negotiations. As Madame Vivienne levitated dossiers of the members of the Council of Heralds, reciting their personalities and political leanings, Amell summoned one file and briefly scanned the first few pages.

"The Silver Lady of Churneau?" She mused, tapping a finger against the drawing of an elderly lady bedecked in silks and scarves, "I've heard of her from Leliana: gaining the Comtesse's favor meant being gifted one of her prized Montbelliard rings."

"The meaning behind the rings is a bit more complicated than that, my dear." Vivienne sighed as she set aside the information that Sister Nightingale had gathered from her spies that infiltrated the fete that Marquise Mantillon had hosted two days ago, "The rings are one of the few things exchanged in the Game that is visible. It is rare to see a lady of her power so brazenly declare who has her approval."

"It suits her purpose because she is the only one utilizing the strategy," Josephine added as she prepared to draft a letter to Duke Laurent de Ghislain, asking if he had any updates to offer regarding the ever changing opinions Duke Germain de Chalons has of his nephew. Her third candle was about to run out of wax. "How much progress have you made, Madame de Fer?"
"Less than what she had hoped for," Amell sighed, propping her head on the decorative edge of the chaise lounge.

"More than I had expected," Vivienne replied after she delicately sipped from her goblet of mulled wine, "Her knowledge of the Orlesian nobility will hopefully make up for any failings she has when she will inevitably maneuver through the court."

"I'll have you know that as an arlessa, I did, on occasion, receive delegates from Orlais wishing to trade in Amaranthine and did not humiliate myself with my barbaric Ferelden manners." Amell rolled her eyes as the other mage sniffed delicately in doubt. "Despite your bias, I do have some amount of poise. If you ever -" She was interrupted by a series of knocks against the door. She craned her neck back in curiosity, "Well. Who might that be?" and in a louder voice, she called, "Come in."

Arcanist Dagna stepped in with her arms tucked behind her, a little more subdued than her entrance this morning when she had happily leaped into the waiting arms of the Inquisitor who had been anticipating her arrival by the gates, talking so quickly that none of the advisors could give a proper welcoming speech. Amell had whisked her to the Undercroft. "Before she blows something up," she had quickly explained to her war council, as Dagna still chattered beside her.

"It's you! Ancestors! It's really you! Have you been well? I've been really well, since, you know, you changed my life. Not many people believed me when I said that the Hero of Ferelden went out of her way to help me get where I am now. But here I am! An Arcanist! And you're an Inquisitor! I didn't believe the rumors - I have... One moment... I have here an official notice: I'm here on official terms to help you in your magic studies! I heard about the rifts. It sounds so fascinating... And terrible. Very terrible. Tragic too. But think about what we can learn from those portals - hardly anyone studied fade magic before the Breach! Can you take me along to a rift? Or maybe... I heard you have a rift mage here. I need samples! Of the rift, not the rift mage... OK, maybe both."

"Warden. Milady Inquisitor. I've finished the masterwork schematics and have a couple of tomes at hand on runic enhancements that I borrowed sort of not really from the Tevinter Imperium..." Dagna shifted from foot to foot, "You might want to warn the Commander about any Tevinter templars barging into Skyhold looking for me. Anyways, it wasn't like anyone was reading them - they were gathering dust on the shelves," Josephine pinched the skin between her eyes, already dreading the potential amends she would have to make to the Black Divine and his Chantry.

"Well," Vivienne finished her wine and circled the rim with a delicate finger, watching with some amount of resignation as the dwarf pulled Amell aside and distracted her with the scholarly aspects of magic. "I guess this means that the lessons for the day are finished, unless she is willing to continue again after the evening meal." She stood, gathering her own belongings with a precise motion of her wrist, and set some bound sheets of vellum onto the corner of Josephine's desk, "Still so many things to do. She mastered the Allemande but not the Courante. I only hope that Sister Nightingale is making more progress than I. The finer subtleties of the Game is not to be underestimated in their influence."

"Sister Nightingale is optimistic," Josephine stated as her gaze shifted from her desk to the mage and dwarf duo still deeply engrossed in their piles of scrolls.

Small phrases such as, "fade-touched - a little bit of the fade will always follow you wherever you go," and "corruption rune creates this sort of increased degeneracy in the muscles, you'll shriven and wither like the skin of a nug," drifted to her ears. She was uncertain as to whether or not she should be wary of the Arcanist's questionable experiments in magic. Leliana had assured her that this was
normal behavior.

"Yes. The Left Hand would know more about our dear Inquisitor due to their shared history," Vivienne considered, "We shall see then. How about you, Lady Ambassador? How goes your preparations for the coming trip to Halamshiral? Did you receive my message?"

"About your designs for our formal wear?" The Antivan asked, twirling her pen between her fingers, referencing a message that one of Madame de Fer's personal couriers had delivered to her the night before. "My dear, I understand that the Inquisition is a military organization with a great deal of political pull, but if you think that having us wear those dreadful, red-gold monstrosities would get us into any nobles' good graces, I'm afraid you're sorely mistaken. I have taken the liberty of asking my own tailors to start designing the garments that I hope you will find more preferable to wear to the Winter Palace. Contact me if you have any further questions. "If you can finish them by the time we depart, then I have no objections." In fact, many people were receptive to the change. When Leliana heard about the new initiative, she started to dreamily describe a pair of silken dancing shoes that she had seen in her youth, garnering strange looks from nearby scouts.

Vivienne looked satisfied as she straightened her sleeves, "Excellent. I'll have a final fitting done two weeks before the date. More details will be forthcoming." Something hit the outer walls, accompanied by an odd noise that sounded like... "Do I hear a goat?" The Orlesian mage's asked with a touch of incredulity, spinning on her heels.

As Josephine pushed her chair back and hurried over to the open window, she caught Amell's raised eyebrow from the other side of the chamber. Amell shrugged but joined her side after bidding Dagna to call for a soldier to investigate this...this most unusual turn of events. They both leaned over and stared down at the goat that balanced precariously on the ledge a few meters below them. The goat bleated as another slammed against the stone walls and clumsily stumbled back to its feet. In the far distance, a man barely larger than an ant was shaking his fist towards the general direction of Skyhold. "Is he Avvar? From the Fallow Mire?" With a hand shielding her eyes from the sun, Amell wondered, "How is he... Oh. That's a nice trebuchet," she said with an admiring tone.

"Inquisitor," Josephine started, recovering from her shock as the man waved his arms about and shouted threats that no one could hear, "should we treat this as an act of aggression?" Amell started laughing, silent ones that shook her shoulders.

"Is this about that barbarian you had slain? The Hand of Korth?" Vivienne observed as the other woman's mirth began to subside, "Judging from the distance that he's placed between himself and this fortress, no, he is not in anyway a threat to us." A small party of Inquisition soldiers emerged from the gates and charged at the Avvar who nimbly dodged them with a spiry vitality that belied his age. Vivienne scoffed, "This day cannot get any stranger. I'll be retreating to my quarters then. Lady Ambassador. Inquisitor."

The two remaining woman watched, mildly entertained (Amell) and mildly horrified (Josephine), as the soldiers tackled and wrangled the Avvar man onto his knees and bound him in chains. "Someone should do something about those goats, Amell remarked as the animals began licking at whatever part of the stone walls they could reach. She turned towards Josephine, her entire countenance bright, her grin so infectious that Josephine found herself smiling back, "To think that I thought that this day would be boring." She sighed happily, "Someone is taking the time to fling goats at Skyhold. I feel so honored."

A messenger knocked on the door, "Inquisitor?" the muffled voice called from the other side, "You're needed at the throne room."
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

From the Ashes

Blackwall

Senior Warden Stroud was a wanted man by both the Inquisition and the Orlesian wardens, proving to be so illusive that the Champion of Kirkwall had developed a habit of pocketing the various notes and messages that were deemed important and then scorching the abandoned hovels out of sheer frustration. "How many smuggler coves are there in Crestwood?" He had lamented as the group ducked behind a cluster of stalagmites as a scouting party of Orlesian wardens wandered by their concealed position. "Carver and Stroud are moving through them faster than the Carta themselves. We're running out of time. Cousin, doesn't your people have some magical, blight sensing technique that can detect other wardens?"

"My people have magical what?" Amell hissed back as the Orlesian wardens walked into a spider ambush deeper in the cave. A stray glob of poison splashed on the ground a couple meters from their position; a lone, hairy spider leg quickly followed. "Where did you hear that? Grey warden talents aren't exactly common knowledge."

Eventually, after the echoes of war cries and the sound of metal piercing soft organs faded into a dull ambiance, Hawke emerged from the shadows, audibly popping the stiff joints in his shoulders. "That's what Anders told me when I asked him how he found the wardens that took Carver in." He plucked a handful of deep mushrooms; the fluorescent glow reflected on his face in sharp, light blue angles, "why would he lie about something so inane?"

Blackwall, despite not being a true warden himself, knew that no skills gained during the Joining included detecting taints in people. Amell rubbed the back of her neck in thought and, flicking cave scum off her shoulder, she hazarded a guess, "Was he trying to impress you? I bet he was trying to impress you. You're definitely his type." Varric made a noise at the back of his throat that denoted thoughtful understanding. "Anders is right in theory: stronger taints light up like beacons - the Archdemon, for example. But wardens have a small taint, a light so weak that its essentially diffused. Also, you won't be able to tell the difference between human and darkspawn."

"I told you Blondie was trying to get into your pants since the beginning," Varric nudged Hawke's ribs, smoothing back a stray strand of hair with a thumb. "He was a warden. Of course he knew the paths that the other wardens would take."

"Anyways," Amell continued before Hawke could snap a word in edgewise, "the Calling is messing with all of our limited 'magical blight' senses," she rubbed her facial markings, "I'm afraid I'm as useless as the rest of you."

Blackwall placed an ear on the wall - the heavy sound of metal booted footsteps were quickly diminished under the louder sounds of dripping water and scurrying nugs. "Clear," he announced, jogging ahead to the entrance of the cave. In the distance on a small path leading away from the Village of Crestwood was a small band of warriors, breastplate emblazoned with the symbol of the
flying griffon, a helmet adorned with decorative wings, silver and navy blue in the distance. "Inquisitor. We should leave now before they double back."

"Right you are," Amell affirmed as she poked a deposit of veridium ore with the pointed end of her sword, "Back to the Three Trout Farm Camp, everyone. We'll try again at nightfall when they start to head east." She cleaned and sheathed her weapon, "At least Clarel is also having a hard time tracking him down. Ah, Stroud. If I had known that you would be this good at hiding, I would've made you..." she shook her head, "Nevermind."

"A spy for the streets. Like that character in **Hard in Hightown** that always gets the girl."

She didn't even jump at the sudden voice that piped over her left shoulder, "I said, 'nevermind,' Cole."

Hawke moodily kicked at the ground, "Have we made any progress at all? Maker's breath. At least its not raining nugs anymore." He squinted upwards as the sunlight broke past the clouds, "I almost forgot what it felt like to be dry." He held out a hand in request, "Blackwall, pass over the map, if you will?"

After a few seconds of deliberation, Blackwall took a pointed step back, "Champion," he began in an uncharacteristic delicate manner, "I mean no disrespect - but the last time you read the map, we got sidetracked by an army of undead, captured Caer Bronach, and spent the better part of the night underground fighting demons. I am glad that we did," he quickly added when Hawke's bottom lip started to stick out in a childish pout, "It is good to help the plight of the villagers. But when we were in that cave, I couldn't help but think..." He scratched at the bald spot on his jawline where the rage demon singed off his beard, struggling to find the words, "Ahh..."

"What Hero is trying to say without being rude is that you suck at navigation," Varric bluntly interjected as he slipped his crossbow back into its hold, "Getting in and out of the flooded tunnels should not have taken from sundown to sunrise." Nodding in approval at the dwarf's eloquence, Blackwall handed the folded map to Amell, who picked at the corners, careful to avoid touching the blood that stained the middle. Behind her, Hawke sulked. "Inquisitor?" Varric bowed magnanimously, "Would you do the honors of guiding us safely back to camp?"

"Varric," she warned, eyes flickering over the drawing and the various labeled regions, "You know the concept of 'safely' eludes me."

"Don't worry. You can't possibly do worse than this guy here," Varric patted Hawke fondly on the arm. With one more dubious glance back, Amell shrugged but decided not to argue any further, absentmindedly rapping her knuckles against the bark of a nearby tree. Tucking the map into her pack, she rolled her shoulders back and set a fast pace down to the hill, heading west. The other four men silently followed suit.

Two hours later, the party stumbled into the jaws of an angry Northern Hunter in the Black Fens. The Champion had not stop laughing since they spotted the shadow of the dragon, quickly flying towards the group, not even when he was gazing straight into the gaping jaws of almost sure death. "Cousin," He gasped through tears of mirth, sending multiple fireballs into the beast's open mouth, "You are amazing. I am so happy right now." Still chortling, he then ducked under a surge of lighting, scooped Varric up, and dashed to the side, just as the ground behind them exploded in a shower of electricity.

"Why? Why does this keep happening to me?" Varric despaired after Hawke set him down at higher ground. After wiping off blood from the corner of his mouth, he readied Bianca, stuffing an
explosive bolt into her slot, "I take back every nice compliment I ever said about you, Inquisitor, and all... Kid. Kid, stay away from its back - oh - too late," wincing, he sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth as Cole was suddenly smacked into the air by the dragon's tail, flying towards the rock outcrops on the other side.

Amell's left hand began to glow - a barrier engulfed Cole's shadowed silhouette just before he landed; he was back on his feet and disappearing into stealth before the cloud of dust settled - she then twisted her wrist, closing her hand into a fist as the sigil on her palm began to glow. "Cole, strike at the underbelly!" She barked as a green tinted hand of spirit magic descended down from a newly created rift and wrung the beast's neck. "Blackwall, cripple the right foreleg - draw its attention - encourage melee attacks!" The Northern Hunter thrashed as blood began to drip from the cuts appearing on its chest.

"This is my third dragon after joining the Inquisition. Not even Hero can match my numbers," Varric kept griping, not even loosing his momentum as he back-flipped, yelping as a stray bolt of lightning jumped from the ground to his boots, "I swear to the Maker, if you're doing this on purpose..."

"You wouldn't believe me if I said I didn't," Amell wiped the sweat off her brow with a sleeve and shifting her grip on her sword, "you just have the worst luck. Look on the bright side, the Abyssal High Dragon was tougher to kill." Varric continued to mutter curses under his breath. "After this... Blackwall, hold your left flank... After this, you can write up another story that'll... Andraste's flaming... Hold on." She fade-stepped, reappearing in the air above the beast and swung in a wide arc, forcing the hunter's head down, impaling its neck on top of Hawke's strategically placed spikes of ice. "After this," she pushed her damp hair out of her face, as the dragon's pained cries died out, "you can write up another story that would make Bull green with jealousy. Now get over here and help me pick off the scales."

Later that night, the party gathered around the campfire, comfortably tended to by the healers. The Inquisition banner hung proudly from its stand next to the tents. A small cauldron sat in the corner, bubbling with what smells to be regeneration potion. While Amell stood at the requisition table, chatting with the officer on duty about the whereabouts of needed materials, the others were on their second and third servings of dinner. Dragon meat had the consistency and texture of bronto that has been aged for at least a year and none of its flavor. Still, not many men or women in Thedas can boast to have eaten a high dragon.

Hawke was curiously poking at Cole's cheek; the boy in question did not mind the contact. "So," the Champion drawled out, "Cole, is it? Varric told me that you're a spirit - like Justice but without the Anders and significantly less terrifying."

Cole's expression was hidden by the wide brim of his hat, "I will force him to see what he did. Until then, death is mercy and he will not have it."

The light in Hawke's eyes flickered, "I stand corrected. There are many ways to be terrifying."

Silently agreeing, Blackwall took the opportunity to excused himself from the group. Even if Cole professed to be a spirit of compassion, anyone that had the ability to lay bare one's innermost thoughts (and does so without shame) was going to be considered a threat.

Mockingbird, mockingbird, quiet and and still, what do you see from the top of that hill?
Can you see up? Can you see down? Can you see the dead things all around town?

Amell was still by the requisition table, propping a hip against the edge as she gazed out to the small flickering lights in the Village of Crestwood, sipping a hot mug of tea, a placid calm over her features. As he drew near, she glanced up, set down her cup, and folded her arms, "Let me guess," she drummed her nails against her metal guards, "You are wondering why I bring you along every
time I search for Stroud and Carver."

"Inquisi-," he bit back the automatic title and considered his choice of words, "Warden-Commander," he corrected, coughing into a closed fist, "I suspected that you wished for me to shadow and observe. Was I right?"

She tilted her head to the side, "Partially," she assented, "You're in an unusual position. Recruits do not know as much as you do about us - and I'm still trying to figure out if you are mentally suited to join the ranks." Her eyes narrowed: he could feel her stare like piercing arrows of ice on his skin and struggled not to fidget like a young boy.

He stood at ready position, clasping his hands behind his back, "Honor is an option, not a requirement," he parroted her words that she had said a few weeks prior when he had asked her the possibility to undergo the Joining. It is a hard life and hardly noble. In such a secretive group, your own secrets are not so valued - they will eventually be revealed at your own volition or others. That's not a threat; that's an inevitability. She hummed in acceptance and turned away, returning back to her silent vigilance over the settlements below, silently dismissing him from her side. Blackwall hesitated to leave, the hairs on his neck stood upright at the howls made by a nearby pack of black wolves, "Warden-Commander. If I may ask. What happens if you don't have the right mentality?"

Amell shrugged, "from my limited experience: you abandon the organization, hide among degenerates, blow up a chantry, and start an international war." She craned her neck back, eyes glowing from the moonlight, her smile showing entirely too much teeth, "But who knows. Anders is Anders. You would be better - at least, I hope, for your sake."

**Leliana**

The Commander's grip was still unsteady when he held his pieces. She was kind enough to look away every time she spotted the beginning signs: tense jaw and short, pained breaths. His recovery has progressed in leaps and bounds. She and Seeker Cassandra had originally predicted a best case scenario of a full recovery within five years, yet the man was only months into his detoxification and already his worst symptoms: fits of violence, losing time, hallucinations, and insomnia: were lessening in frequency. (Earlier today, a messenger reported spotting a small vial of sleeping potion sitting on the windowsill behind him - Amell must have brewed some for him before she left for the Dales. The tonics were apparently very effective.)

"You're better than Dorian, at least," Cullen hid his smirk behind his steepled fingers, staring at the chessboard between them where, despite all of her underhanded methods, he was winning. She pursed her lips as she twirled his captured bishop between her fingers, eyes narrowing in displeasure as he promoted his newly eighth ranked pawn into his second queen, "Do you still play often?"

Leliana reclined back to her armchair, crossing her arms. "When the Inquisitor can spare the time for me." *When she's not playing with you* - went unsaid. "In Haven, I often played with my scouts to keep my skills sharp. But since we arrived here, I hardly indulged." Allowing some bitterness to leak into her words, she conveyed a general tone indicating that the topic at hand was still tender. It was only a fortnight ago that she had traveled with her men and women back south to Haven to collect the dead and salvage what they could from the buried ruins. It was not a pleasant task - placing names onto frozen, burnt, mangled faces, looking away from eyes that were frozen open in horror.

His mouth twisted in empathy,"I am sorry."

She shook her head, "No, I am." Seeing the confusion on his face, she continued, "When the first of my lookouts went missing, I pulled the rest back, scared to loose more of my agents. There was no
one to warn us of the invasion. If it were not for..." a stranger, barely reaching adulthood and by all accounts, according to the records in the White Spire, dead. She captured his rook with her bishop. "Because of my decision, we lost Haven."

"It is not your fault." With eyes staring far into the past, his voice hardened with conviction, "Nothing could've stopped Corypheus that night."

She snarled in frustration, sick of platitudes and sympathy; to his credit, he did not flinch, "Not my fault?" she hissed, waving a hand to her right past the arches to the corner of the garden where a small gravestone, framed in arbor blessing and rashvine, was erected, remembering and honoring those lost to the invasion, "What if I bought us more time? Better my scouts' lives than... But I cared too much for them and not enough for the Inquisition." She struggled to keep her volume low against the curious eavesdroppers. "My people are like yours: they know their duty, know the risks. I should have -"

He abruptly cut her off, "I don't treat my people as tools to be used and discarded," words harsh and slightly tinted with disgust, "Every able-bodied man and woman is a blessing. Take each person as a gift from the Maker. Laud their accomplishments, mourn their sacrifices, take measures to make sure the tragedy will not happen again." By the time he was finished with his speech, he had stopped speaking in hushed tones and was drawing in admiring onlookers. He has grown confident and steady, a Commander, presence befitting his station, no longer the helpless templar shaking in his magic cage, no longer blinded by the fear of magic.

She narrowed her eyes; the crowd surrounding them immediately dispersed, determinedly immersed in their own tasks. "Corypheus does not abide by that philosophy."

"We are better than Corypheus," he countered with equal measure, "Sentimentality is not a weakness. It is being moral." He quirked an eyebrow, as he moved to trap her queen into the corner, smirk turning into a broad grin as she cursed, "despite how little you act like one, I'm relatively certain that you are human, Sister Nightingale."

Shaking her head, she huffed a laugh, "Relatively certain?" She repeated as she pushed a pawn forward. "You wound me, Commander" she muttered as her attention drew away from the conversation and back to the game at hand, of which she was still loosing horribly. Three more moves and he would have her in check.

Amell had said something similar when Leliana had expressed her regrets three days after they had settled into Skyhold, "Sometimes, you seem human. Othertimes, you are more akin to fast-acting contact poison." Voice echoing along walls of the small enclave, Amell lit a red candle and slowly, mindful of the hot wax, passed it over to her open hands. "Careful not to walk any further down the latter path," she warned as Leliana prayed and cried, on her hands and knees, forehead touching the ground, before the statue of Andraste, "The blood that you'll trail behind you will ruin your satin shoes."

The air had smelled of crystal grace that bloomed from heavy pots sitting on the far terrace. Two young girls played by the gazebo, each bearing an elfroot crown woven by their mother who was sitting in the shade and sewing close a tear in a jacket sleeve. Mother Giselle and a small entourage of earth-aligned mages attended to the seedlings of rare herbs in the nursery, testing soil acidity and moisture.

Four minutes later, Cullen tipped her king to its side. "You win again," she conceded, after the piece rolled to a stop at the foot of his second queen, and offered, "I have time enough for one more game."
He glanced at the sun, a bit apprehensive, but she did not miss the longing glance he gave to the chessboard, "I'm not sure I can. There is still a lot of work on my desk that needs to be done before she -" returns. He rubbed the back of his head. If Leliana hadn't know any better, she would've attributed the flush at his neck to sunburn.

"One more game before I let yo go," she smoothly bargained as her smile turned sly, "Or else I'll tell her why you often let her win even though she looses to me." Because you keep staring and loosing yourself in conversation, because you are enraptured. Buffing her nails against her cowl, Leliana rolled her eyes as Cullen sputtered his way through weak denials and began to reset the board.

**Cassandra**

"How did you manage to read this?" Hawke curiously asked, wiggling a finger through the knife hole that pierced the center of *Tale of the Champion*. She refrained from telling him that subsequent rereads in Haven had been fraught with liberal reinterpretations of the missing text. She almost regretted using the biography as an intimidation tactic during her interrogation with its author. "The damage extends from front to back." He whistled in appreciation as he flipped the book over, thumbing at the well-worn spine.

"Vendors do not sell them anymore," she informed him, shifting her weight from foot to foot, "not after word of your fugitive status began to spread."

"That makes sense." He decided after a moment of thought, twirling the pen in his fingers with ridiculous dexterity that she had once believed was reserved to rogues, "Best not to encourage the young and impressionable minds to follow in my footsteps. Would not recommend my set of friends and adventures for the faint-hearted." He flipped to the inside cover and began scribbling down a short message, "I'm sure Varric can get you another copy if you ask nicely," He brightened, "It can be autographed by both of us!"

Cassandra coughed into her glove, "I'd rather not tell Varric," she muttered, eyes lowered to the ground at the small bare patch of dirt where she had been scuffing her boots.

"He won't laugh," he reassured, "much," he added, as he scratched his beard with the pen, "Huh. This is actually the first time I got asked to sign this book." He mused absentmindedly as he made the final flourish, "and there you are: one poignant message by yours truly - once said to me by a wise woman. She may have been a dragon."

At his urging, she flipped to the first page and search for his slanted cursive. *From Garrett Hawke. To my number one fan: Seeker Cassandra Allegra (...) Maker's breath) Portia Calogera Filomena Pentaghast. Fourteenth cousin to the King of Nevarra, nine times removed. Hero of Orlais. Right Hand of the Divine.* Below was a poorly drawn stick figure carrying an enlarged shield that bore a passing resemblance to the Seeker emblem. Words failed her; her fingers tightened around the book. The part of her that was raised on tales of heroism and saw Hawke as an admirable figure warred with the part of her that recently learned how much a scoundrel (a caring one, but a scoundrel none-the-less) the Champion of Kirkwall was outside the books and rumors.

How does Hawke know of her full name? She had taken great pains to make sure that all of her titles that she could claim never left Nevarra and had been assured by Leliana that only the advisors had been told. So how... And as sudden as the question appeared in her mind, so did the answer.

Varric.

She didn't have any proof. She couldn't say how he could have gotten his hands on the information
or why he would even bother with the effort except to find some strange pleasure in her disapproval. The worst part was that she couldn't even confront the dwarf about it because it would bound to raise the question of how she knew that Hawke knew. The advice that Hawke had jotted down seemed to come from a person who was well experienced in recovering from unimaginable trauma. *Regret is something I know well. Take care not to cling to it, to hold it so close that it poisons your soul.* "Flemeth actually said it to my brother - but I thought that you might need to hear them too," Hawke commented over her loud thoughts, "since, you know, the Conclave."

"Thank you, Hawke," she nodded and tucked the book into her side pack.

"It's not a problem. You're one of Varric's..." he waved a hand at the air between them, "Well, 'friends' is a bit too strong of a word at the moment, but you're getting there." His eyes scanned the isolated training field, at the fresh training dummies of cloth, wood, and packed straw, "Not to mention my cousin needs reliable people to watch her back." He shoved his hands into his pockets and rolled his shoulders back, "I won't be there all the time for them but I'll be damned if I don't at least leave them in good hands. So if there is anything in my power that I can do for you, even if its something as inane as signing your torn book..." He left the implied offer hanging, waiting for any last requests.

She wanted him to tell her the stories of defeating the Arishok and his experiences in Kirkwall as a witness to the growing tensions between the templars and mages. She wanted to ask about the tattooed sigil on his upper arm that she recognized as a reservoir for power, a tool that usually blood mages utilized to gain more power in their spellwork. Instead, she reached back into her side pack and pulled out one of Varric's lesser known novels. Hawke's eyebrows raised in surprise as he stared at the front cover: an armored warrior woman, red hair fanning behind her, standing over the bodies of her enemies. Cassandra cleared her throat and started haltingly, "It's a good book; I enjoy reading it. But I don't know when the next chapter is going to be published - or if he even started the outline. Maybe some friendly encouragement can speed the process... As long as he doesn't trace the request back to me..." Hawke silently kneaded the bridge of his nose. "It's literature," she argued.

He wordlessly pointed to the back cover: a picture of Varric, surrounded by sensual dwarven women, stared back at them with the all too familiar expression of self-satisfaction.

"Smut literature," she corrected. "But the plot is better than you would expect from mindless drivel of similar genres," she hurriedly continued, "for example, the character dynamics between rivals and lovers are remarkably similar in that -"

If anyone had told Cassandra a month ago that she would be defending *Sword and Shields* as quality book of leisure to the Champion of Kirkwall, she would've glared the potential seer into fearful submission. And yet here she was, an hour later, sitting in the shade provided by the high walls of Skyhold, trying to justify her reading choices to the man who could barely sit still for more than ten minutes before beginning to fidget (the restlessness must run in the family - the Inquisitor was barely able to exclude an air of dignity and stoicism when she sat on her throne for Judgment). But Hawke was listening, humoring her in a somewhat mystified and bemused manner, to her analysis on each character's motivations and how this line of dialogue made by the Knight-Captain foreshadowed the death of a rival in love.

"Are you setting up a book club, Cassandra?" a voice piped up behind them. Only years of training as a Seeker had prevented her from twitching in a way that would betray her surprise. Hawke, on the other hand, immediately scrambled back, overcompensated on his balance, and smacked his head against the stone behind him. "Ah. Sorry," with an poor attempt at sounding contrite, Amell peered over Cassandra's shoulder, "You probably read *The Rose of Orlais* too, don't you?"
"The Rose of Orlais?" Hawke parroted, a hand cradling the back of his head.

Amell shrugged, "A story of Lady Talia Lyonne and her tempestuous romance with arrogant chevalier, Garren," she pitched her voice low, as if imitating another voice. "Wynne offered it to me as light reading. To my credit, I tried, but I'm more inclined towards historical nonfiction. You might prefer it more than I since this book has a similar feel..." She tilted her head to the side as she read out loud the first few sentences of the page opened, "and her perfume still scents his sheets. The mere memory of their shared night of passion invites a sweet ache in his groin. No more did he have to endure kisses to chaste areas, she was his and he intended to take her thoroughly until she could think of no one else but -"

Blushing hotly, Cassandra snapped the book shut and immediately regretted the action when Amell's eyebrows rose further into her hairline as she stared at the back cover drawing of Varric Tethras and his entourage of women. Cassandra opened her mouth and turned to Hawke, silently asking for assistance. Hawke raised both of his hands and shook his head. "It's one of Varric's tales," she answered after a long pause, placing the remains of her dignity into that final answer, refusing to elaborate less she digs deeper into the hole that she already found herself in.

"It's no Hard in Hightown. But I'm not going to criticize one's taste in books," she slowly straightened, brushing the dirt off the hems of her tunic. "Anyways, its nothing to be ashamed of. Just, don't tell Dorian, he's more inclined towards action and adventure, the less said to him about romantic subplots the better."

"Swords and Shields has equal amounts of intrigue as romance." Hawke rapped a knuckle fondly against the cover, "I had always thought that it was going to be a retelling of the agony that came with encouraging Aveline to confess her love to Guardsman Donnic. But the characters are different enough. Except for the Captain, that bastard had stayed a bastard." Cassandra was mildly shocked that he had absorbed that much from her long-winded summary and analysis. "You're welcome to join us. It seems like you're running away from something..." He offered, tapping his chin, "Someone?"

"Perceptive, aren't you?" Amell grumbled, throwing a nervous glance over her shoulder, "Vivienne wanted to make some final adjustments to the dress for the ball at Halamshiral. If I have to walk up and down the balcony aisle one more time with small pins poking at my sides, I will-" small embers danced on her fingers and quickly died away, "At least I like the color." Cassandra vaguely recalled the warden-blue gown with silver trimmings hanging off a manikin that Madame de Fer had kept fussing over, tugging at the thin shoulder straps as she repeatedly weaved multiple enchantments over the satin and silk. "Though, it looks impractical. Where will you hide the knives?"

"You're not expected to fight in a dress, Inquisitor," Cassandra dryly pointed out as Hawke invitingly patted at the spot next to him. "But yes, the Champion is correct: you can stay with us while we discuss, even if these sorts of books are not to your liking."

"Thank you," Amell replied in relief, dropping into a cross-legged position onto the grass. "I'll wager at least two more hours before she walks outside to search for me herself. Until then..." She gave the book a considering look, "Sell me the story, Seeker. Why do you enjoy it?"
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The Old Gods will call to you,
From their Ancient Prisons they will sing.
Dragons with WICKED EYES AND WICKED HEARTS,
On blacken'd wings does deceit take flight,
The First of My children, lost to night.

-Canticle of Silence 3:6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Josephine

Sera was the first to hop out of her carriage, restlessly shifting her weight from foot to foot as she peered at the looming architecture of the Winter Palace with an expression of eager anticipation. "Heard about this place from the Red Jenny's. Real grand. Didn't know how grand," she opened her arms out and executed a complex pirouette, "Can see why they like it. You can hide a lot of things in something that big." Josephine tried to ignore the mischievous glint that grew bright in her eyes as the elf continued to laugh and dance with the vivacity that came with young age, drawing the attentions of nearby onlookers who immediately assumed her to be an elven ward of sorts to an eccentric family. She also garnered disapproving stares for her two piece ensemble that was made entirely out of the most eye-catching patterns of plaidweave.

(No one knew how she managed to successfully challenge Madame de Fer's original choice of formal wear and frankly, no one was brave enough to ask. Whenever the topic was cautiously broached en route to Halamshiral, the Orlesian mage would develop a dangerous tick in her right eye that would rise in frequency in direct relation to the amount of gleeful spite in Sera's smile.)

"Orleans," that one word spoken, innocuous as it was, encompassed the entirety of the Inquisitor's scorn and disdain for the high-class political culture that she was walking into. Amell's eyes scanned the open grounds, swiftly categorizing every masked guest that glanced their way behind jeweled beaks and silk fans.

"Inquisitor," Josephine chided, inclining her head in greeting, receiving a benign smile in return. "We are being watched." Now was the time for all members of the Inquisition to be hyper-aware of their surroundings, of what they say, and of how they act. Out of her periphery she spotted the Spymaster and the Commander emerging from their respective carriages. Sera had disappeared without a trace. Solas stood by the Inquisition guards, engaging them in idle conversation, his bare head adorned with a rather curious looking hat. Further away, Madame Vivienne stepped down from her carriage, resplendent in her white gown, positively glowing in its purity.

Amell's placid smile did not falter as she pondered, "Somewhere out there, Senior Warden Stroud and Warden Carver are waiting and instead of searching for them, I am here, catering to the whims of nobility." She casually pushed her hair back, ink-black tresses falling in gentle waves behind her -
Leliana had convinced her to let it loose rather than weave it back in her normal style. "Apologies, Josephine. I'm obligated to warn you that all these years living in a secretive niche organization that accepted backgrounds from any and all have warped my perception of societal norms. But I will endeavor not to let my annoyances show."

"I'm sure my faith is not misplaced," Josephine soothed as she picked out a small notebook from her satchel, careful of her off-shoulder sleeves, "You know the Game. We have already discussed the three potentials for Orlesian rule. But be careful. How you act in court will influence Orlais's future relationship to the Inquisition. Just remember all of our lessons together and that the court values presence above all else. Go on," she urged, making a small shooing motion with her hand, "mingle with the guests here. I'll see you at the main gates."

"Lady Ambassador," Amell murmured, dropping in a half-curtsy before twirling on her heels, the hem of her dress rising to reveal a pair of silver satin shoes that Leliana had designed with love and care, decorated in gold threaded embroideries. Josephine watched as she greeted the other two advisors with warm smiles and kind words, as she laid a hand on the Commander's arm and let it linger. In the absence of conversation, the Ambassador could barely make out the whispers aim at their direction, gossips and rumors, designed to prod, test, and possibly incite a reaction.

"A mage? Lady Inquisitor is a mage?"

"I heard from Duke Bastien that she is the Hero of Ferelden."

"A Ferelden? Those dog lords? How disgusting!"

"But she's not truly Ferelden, is she? Look at her coloring. She's clearly an Amell. All known members of the family had scattered from Kirkwall, save for two."

"We might have a problem," Josephine informed the other advisors as they approached, her eyes darting to the opposite end of the garden where Solas and Amell walked up the stairs leading to the covered walkway, a halla statue in the latter's arms. The eyes that followed the duo belonged to predators, hungry enough to be of concern. "This event is a perfect opportunity to solidify and form new alliances. I didn't realize the extent of our own Inquisitor's appeal despite her status as a warden mage. She will surely be offered marriage proposals from families wishing to capitalize on our recent success."

Leliana pursed her lips, gaze sliding from Josephine to the Commander who's countenance shifted from stoic professionalism to silent wrath, "You needn't worry about her gracelessly turning down suitors, Josie. Amell is at least used to those sorts of interactions and the methods of Orlesian courting are not that different compared to Ferelden." She giggled behind a sea-green sleeve, a metallic polished edge peaking through before she readjusted the lace trimmings, "Still, we will need to run interference. Do you agree, Commander?"

"It will be done," he grimly assented, eyes half-lidded in barely hidden desire, trailing on the Inquisitor's form as she greeted Duke Gaspard de Chalons by the cobblestone path. "No need to add more to her stress on such an important evening." His gaze pinned down any passer-by that had even the faintest glint of interest in her until they felt his killing intent and warily backed off, unaware of where the sudden cold fury originated from.

"Yes, among other reasons." Leliana snidely added, just loud enough that no one outside of their immediate circle heard. Cullen flushed bright red, nearly matching the shade of his military jacket. "She is a sight to behold, is she not?" When not encumbered by the bulky armor she wore on expeditions or the chain mail she wore within Skyhold, it was startling to see how lithe she truly was. The corset fitted snug under her breasts and hugged her sides, emphasizing slim curves until light
satin flared from her hips. The warden-blue shade of her gown was a bold choice of color but she wore it well.

Amell returned, a bit breathless, as the first bells chimed from the towers. "Are we ready to enter the den of lions?" She brightly asked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Josephine tucked her notes back into her satchel and straightened. So much hinged on this one night where anything, even something as small as a particular glove on a particular table, can ruin reputations and families. The Game usually does not thrill her as much as it does Leliana, but even she felt the anticipation, the tightening stress in her abdomen, as the bells died down and the groups slowly moved towards the main gates. "Lead the way, Lady Ambassador."

Amell

Empress Celene du Valmont was a jewel toned adder that had already emptied her venom sacs trying to push her enemies back but has instead trapped herself into a corner. Still, even in her weakened state, she was an opportunist - surveying her subjects and guests, searching for potential alliances and ways to secure her throne. "Warden Commander Daylen," she clasped her hands together, leaning over the balcony balustrade, as Grand Duke Gaspard made his final bows and departed for the side stairs, "though I suppose Inquisitor is your new designation these days. Another one for the history books, no?"


"My dear, that is a rather masculine name," Vivienne delicately observed as the announcer moved on to call Solas the Inquisitor's personal servant.

Amell felt her left eye twitch as she stepped forward, "I am well aware. Mother apparently had wished dearly for a son." Her name had garnered her no end of grief. Specifically, there was that one incident where the newly appointed Knight-Captain, having just transferred from Ostwick and therefore not familiar with his charges, assigned templar guards to apprentices without double checking the names against their respective genders on the forms. He never made that mistake ever again. At least, Amell had later consoled herself, her minder was as horrified as she was, which was impressive because mortifying embarrassment is an emotion hard to portray when one's head was covered by a helmet and communication was limited to body language hindered by templar armor.

"Your Radiance," she graciously smiled, fleetingly wishing that she too had an Orlesian mask to hide her face behind, "Though it has been long, I remember asking you to address me by my family name."

"Beg pardon: I just recalled your request. Ten years since I met your acquaintance at King Alistair's official coronation," Celene reminisced, holding a hand up to her mouth to conceal a smile, "and it seems like nothing about your general state has changed. I hope your country is the same?" Amell briefly wondered if that phrase was a compliment to her or a reference to Ferelden's recovery since the Blight.
"You flatter me. I can say the same," she demurred, "Neither has your empire, grand as it is bold," ignoring the fact that the Orlesian civil war could be argued by some historians to have started the moment Valmont had ascended into power. She could almost hear Josephine's mental face-palm and her quiet admonishment of the dangers that come when implying too much behind simple words. It is not the words that matter, but where the speaker pauses and places emphasis. The crowd tittered behind her: low murmurs beyond the banisters were accompanied by the snaps of fans opening and closing. Behind the empress was another lady, wearing a peach and burgundy gown, a high collar flared outward, framing coiffed hair and an austere bearing. "Grand Duchess Florianne of Lydes," Amell acknowledged, inclining her head, "I have heard that you were the one responsible for successfully organizing tonight's event?"

"I am, Lady Inquisitor," Grand Duchess Florianne held the sides of her dress in stiff fingers and curtsied, "Your presence, though a surprise, is not unwelcome and in fact makes these proceedings more interesting. We will talk later tonight to discuss things you might deem an interest - perhaps over a dance?" As the woman turned away, the shadow of her mask combined with the light cast the curl of her lips into an expression that seemed less congenial and more sinister, "As we have exhausted the important members of our guest list, I will take my leave, cousin."

As the Grand Duchess disappeared behind silk screen doors, Empress Celene held out a hand, an elegant wave encompassing the entirety of the ballroom, "Though it is a surprise that Gaspard has extended an invitation towards you without consultation or warning, I am delighted that you have accepted." Her eyes pinned Amell down, as if trying to peel back layers to see her most vulnerable areas. "Opportunistic lioness," Leliana had noted. "Your exploits, new and old, have been the talk among my people over the dinner table. We've tried hard to impress you in return. Tell me, how are you liking Halamshiral?"

The word 'ostentatious' perched at the tip of her tongue. The Winter Palace was impeccably pristine, gleaming white wainscoting; crystals harvested from the deepest caves formed heavy chandeliers. There was an underlying static pressure in the air that she attributed to elven magics, nearly masked by the cloying scent of perfume - subtle lavender and rosewood. "I have never seen anything quite like it, your Radiance."

Celene's smile matched that of her cousin's, "Seeing as that our histories are a part of our culture and lifestyle, I thought it suitable to show you a city that boasts of a long past reaching back to the Ancient Age. I daresay nothing in your kingdom can compare. Do enjoy the evening, Inquisitor."

"Dog's pedigree is older than your noble house," she thought irritably as she was dismissed, with nothing more to say unless she intended to truly offend her host, and left the lower levels of the ballroom. At the top of the steps, Leliana waited in the shadows offered by the thick newel, arms crossed. Even in the semi-darkness, Amell could make out among her usually detached expression a quiet disgruntlement - a grimace that she usually reserved for one person in particular. "Inquisitor," the Spymaster's fingers wrapped around her wrist, "a moment of your time. There is someone who..." Sighing as she gave up her struggle for the proper words, Leliana gently tugged the other woman along, "It'll be better if you would just come with me."

She guided Amell to a side hallway past the elven servants and a long banquet table displaying plates of charcuterie accompanied by thick slices of bread to a darkened alcove where the mysterious guest awaited. The silhouette suggested a woman around Leliana's height, dressed in the Orlesian style implying a stiff crinoline under a low waistline, a textured bodice, and sleeves pinched in at the elbows. "When the first rumors of the Inquisitor's exploits reached me, I had thought them fanciful and mere conjecture. Though I suppose that nothing is considered absurd when you are involved, old friend," the shadow contemplated, snapping her fan close.
Amell knew of only one person whose tone contained a unique combination of one part acerbity, two parts sarcasm, and seven parts fondness, "Morrigan!" she clasped the other's hands in delight as her vision adjusted to the dim lighting - hooded, cat-like eyes, bangs framing high cheekbones, black hair pined back into an artfully, messy bun. Amell paused as she scrutinized more closely: it was to be expected that one would change with time, but somehow there was an air of contentment about her that she would've never predicted Morrigan to carry a decade ago, "Motherhood has softened you," she observed. It was a testament to how accurate her statement was when she did not have to dodge a bolt of lightning for her cheek. Still, she decided not to verbalize her other observation that Morrigan's dress matched the description of the one Leliana had dreamed of ten years ago: *Dark red velvet, yes. With gold embroidery. It should be cut low in the front of course, we don't want to hide your features.*

"Yes, as much as a mother wyvern can be softened," Leliana muttered, earning a cold look from the woman, leaning against a pedestal that held a gold encased bust of a roaring lion. "Empress Celene's... Occult Advisor," she reported with a hint of disdain in her choice of words, "found intruders within the palace. Tevinters with, I suspect, connections to our enemy."

"Corypheus," Amell mulled over, "And here I thought it would be rude to point out the blood stains on your front. Let me guess: you killed them before you could interrogate them?"

"'Twould be foolish of me not to when they attacked first. Motherhood does not suddenly render me helpless as a babe." Morrigan reached into the folds of her dress and pulled out an ornate skeleton key, "If Sister Nightingale is correct, then you should thank me for making your objective here easier. I picked this off the body. You might find it useful."

Amell turned the looted object a couple of times in her hand, squinting at the faint inscription written on the handle, "The servant quarters? Why would assassins be trying to access the off-limit areas if they are after Celene?" Her gaze sharpened in thought, "Or is it not just the empress they are after... To achieve instability in Orlais, you'll have to take care the entire royal line. But the elves..."

"Briala is a possible candidate," Leliana's eyes darted around, casting suspicious glances at anyone who ventured too close to their secluded area, "She cannot be a public face but there are many ways to rule. I've eavesdropped by the Hall of Heroes: her servants are disappearing - she is beside herself in worry."

"You favor the elf?" Morrigan asked as Amell craned her neck back, raising an eyebrow at the guests that attempted to spy on their coterie.

"More so than the line of succession. Empress Celene brought about a revivalism of arts and education, but I've seen no social changes. Ambassador Briala will bring sweeping reformations, one that I hope will rival that which came with the crowning of the King and Queen of Ferelden," Leliana restlessly tapped her nails against the wood paneling, "Grand Duke Gaspard would only give the Inquisition a greater headache once we achieve our peace. There is no need for a bolstered military during the reconstruction, especially not from a country whose borders we sit upon."

Though all three choices were equally distasteful in her opinion, anything was better than Corypheus overtaking the country. Still... "Point," Amell crossed her arms, absentmindedly chewing on her bottom lip. Tossing the key from hand to hand, she swayed from foot to foot, "Well. This night is proving to be much more interesting than I had anticipated. You won't be joining me on this adventure, Morrigan?"

Morrigan shook her head, "I must keep vigil by the empress's side. Her life is coveted by many who seek her position and though I do not know from whence the next attack will happen, I do know that my mere presence is enough to deter most attempts." She raised a hand, slowly rotating her wrist as
black and purple magic of an entropy spell wavered like a flame in her palm. "I guarantee you... and the Inquisition that she will be alive until the final negotiations. Until then, enjoy the festivities and we will talk later when the night ends. We have," a painted nail grazed against the fire opal pendant resting below Amell's collar, "much to discuss."

Amell's lips quirked upwards, "Your mother mentioned you with fondness."

"I'm afraid I cannot say the same," Morrigan dryly replied, "You must regale me with the details later." She bowed low at the waist, one hand resting across her abdomen, the other behind her back, "Take care of yourselves. Even you, Leliana." She swept out of their niche back into the crowd, blending in with the countless myriad of colors.

"She has mellowed out. You cannot deny that," Amell remarked as she and Leliana watched her leave. "Though I wonder how she managed to claim the position of Arcane Advisor. She's in a dangerous position even without these threats due to her upbringing."

"You still worry for her? Technically, with the mage rebellion, you are all apostates," Leliana made a notation into a small book that she had pulled from a hidden pocket in her skirts, "The nobles probably did not ask too many questions about their Arcane Advisor so long as she divined their futures and spoke with the dead." The Spymaster kept mumbling to herself as they walked closer to the corridor that led to the guest garden, still shuffling through the pages of her notes, "Pity that not all of our enemies would be coming from Corypheus. Josie informed me that even our staunchest ally will hesitate if we openly support Brialia."

Leliana giggled softly into a manicured hand before making some noise about seeing what Sera and Solas can find out in regards to the clandestine meetings between the elven servants. The Spymaster spun on her heels, fabric gently swaying against the marbled floors as she glided to the direction of the vestibule and past some guards stationed by the trophy room.

Amell lingered by the doorway to the guest garden, breathing in the cool air, listening to the Council of Heralds Vassal's long diatribe against the Grand Duke - the poor man just needed someone to listen to him vent his frustrations against the incompetency of the guards. She carded a hand through her hair as she wandered back to the upper levels, feeling strangely light on her feet: perhaps it has to do with the lack of heavy chainmail she had grown used to wearing. In comparison, this gown, bless Vivienne for its surprising maneuverability, was a cloud - the royale sea silk and satin weave brushed against her skin like a caress from a lover. She briefly marveled at how it easily rippled, following her movements as she turned towards an elven servant that offered her a platter of champagne flutes balanced on a single hand.
"Take care not to pluck the one that smells of almonds," whispered a nearby lady that she vaguely recognized as one of the Empress's ladies-in-waiting, "It is not for you." Smiling blandly in thanks, she took a glass, held delicately at the neck, and took a sip. An aroma of spice and smoke danced across her tongue.

Humming a tune under her breath, she turned the corner, intent on searching for her Ambassador to ask a few questions about halla statues. Instead, she was greeted by a strange sight that caused her grip on her glass to waver. She was relatively certain that laughing was not the correct response to the scene but she couldn't conjure the effort to look even mildly scandalized. In the middle of the upper levels, Cullen stood in a crowd of admirers of both genders who continuously harassed him for stories of his personal life, looking positively miserable.

"If I had met you earlier in person instead of correspondence by letters, I would've asked my father to draft the betrothal contracts," purred a courtier, dragging a finger down his lapels. "Not even one dance, dear?" After a few seconds contemplating whether saving him from this hilarity would be worth it, Amell decided to take pity on the poor man.

"Commander," she modulated her tone to one of soft-spoken authority. The group turned towards her - Cullen's eyes pleaded with her for assistance. She tilted her polished glass flute in his direction, "May I have a word?"

He quickly extricated himself from the masses: the crowd scattered with displeased murmurs as their source of attention left their sides. Cullen, other than a wild look about his eyes, did not seem worse for wear, "Maker's breath," he pulled his sleeves down and rolled his shoulders back, "I'm glad you came when you did. Their invitations were beginning to get..." he grimaced, "physical."

"I am your knight in shining armor," she teased as she set her glass down on a table, "Did you not expect this? No contingency plans in case you accidentally walk into a compromising situation?" They walked to the balconies, idly watching the people standing in the center of the ballroom pair into couples and arrange themselves into neat rows of six. "Don't underestimate the cunning of an Orlesian noble."

He drummed his fingers on the surface of the balustrade, "This is what the Chantry doesn't teach you. But you seem to be flourishing." Peering at her curiously, he asked, "Did you learn all of these intricacies in Amaranthine?"

"Most," she confirmed, eyes following the swirls of fabric, the intricate designs of coat arms, "But Orlais is so different from Ferelden - thank Josephine and Vivienne for not letting me sink." The violins switched to another song without tuning their instruments - the conductor did not even pause as he raised the tempo - the dancers did not protest. Endless circles of colors blended together as they spun, masks tilted to the ceiling, a curious sort of chaos in their movements. "You'll never see this in Ferelden. Isn't it beautiful?"

Turning towards her partner in askance, her smile faded into silent fluster as heat rose from her neck to her cheeks. He stared at her with an emotion that she was wary to interpret in such a public setting, close enough that she could feel his heat, like a fireplace roaring in the dead of winter. "Yes," he softly replied. He was not referring to the dance below.

"Cullen," she frowned, "are you -" A single finger tracing her jawline caused her to swallow heavily, a tongue nervously darting out to moisten chapped lips.

"I'm happy that others here can't see it," he chuckled, barely audible over the din, "I suppose that is selfish of me though." His eyes flickered to something past her head; she also twisted around. One of his more tenacious suitors stood by a lion statue, partially hiding his face with a silk fan. The sudden
pressure on her chest that came from the intensity of his stare lessened considerably; though the tense atmosphere between them faded, he still exuded warmth that a part of her wished to step into and close her eyes as it enveloped her and rest - because here was stable and safe and... "Instead, they want me," he continued with a rueful smile, "and they'll swarm as soon as you leave."

She tapped her lip in thought. A moment later, that same hand began digging into the hidden pockets of her dress, "Hold on, I might have something," she explained as one of his eyebrows rose, "It's a bit unconventional but it's either this or hide behind Leliana for the rest of the night. You'll want to meet with her soon - she has some things to report regarding an investigation," she added as an afterthought, "Here you are - I found it in one of the pots outside by the entrance," a caprice coin was placed into his open hand, a smoothed over inscription as if someone had worried their thumb over the surface until it gained its shine. "It should ward off all but the most ardent of admirers," she explained, curling his fingers over the gift, "Toss it into the garden fountain and make sure people see -" She chanced a glance up and froze when he chuckled.

"Thank you," he bent down and brushed his lips over her knuckles. She swallowed as his eyes flitted up to meet hers.

Did he know that they were tokens of regard from patrons or lovers? "I care for you, but it has been ten years and love is not... I'm not there yet. But I think I will be," she had told him. Since then, she had spent her scant amount of free time with him in Skyhold pushing against her own boundaries, cautiously flirting back when he made advances. The dull ache in her chest that she had felt since Haven had grown so strong that she dreamed sometimes of his eyes and his hands, wrapped around her sides as he drew her in. The emotions somewhat frightened her: she never felt this way towards anyone before.

"Though I'm not a chevalier, I think they will understand," he flipped the coin in the air, deftly catching it with two fingers. "Amell. Do you mean it?" ...Oh. So he does know the history behind the Caprice Coins. His words were heavily laced with intent and every bit of that strange hunger that she felt in every interaction with him.

There were no regrets in the act of giving him the coin, as spontaneous as it would seemed. Her decision was an accumulation of their time together and... Well... She wanted to surprise him - but plans changed. She faintly smiled and affirmed, "Yes," as she squeezed his hands. "I'll talk to you later?" she softly inquired. Maybe once the peace accords finished and once the Inquisition was certain that Corypheus would not take over the entire country, she'll find him in a secluded area out of public eye and... At his nod, she gently slid her hands from his grip and curtsied. After giving one last look at the couples below, she retreated back to the crowds, leaving him by the railings, searching through the sea of strangers for Josephine.

**Solas**

The endless trays of hors d'oeuvres that moved past him resembled more of elaborate pieces of art than actual foodstuff. He accepted a celery crudite to not offend the cooks and surreptitiously dropped it into a nearby vase when he detected magebane in the vinaigrette. Across the concourse, he spotted the Inquisitor in a heated discussion with the Grand Duke and wondered if he should intervene as the man wrapped his gloved fingers around her wrist. Solas minutely relaxed as she tapped against the bundle of nerves above her captors wrist, forcing him to relax his grip, and slipped away.

From his hidden vantage point, he could see both nobles and servants alike, all careful in keeping
their distance from him, "They say that he's the Inquisitor's personal manservant but he matches the
description of that apostate she keeps with her." A pair of servers murmured in the distant alcove.
Little did they know, his hearing was more sensitive than that of elves of this era - perks of living
during Elvehnan and gifted with powers that few could even dream of.

The orchestra started another prelude, ascending arpeggios in a minor scale - crowds slowly
gravitated to the instruments, murmuring in appreciation. Solas was twirling his long emptied wine
glass when two handmaidens swept by, "- reports of Michel de Chevin in Sahrnia. The demon too."
He ducked further into the corner, assuming the air of a forgettable, beleaguered manservant - he had
chosen his outfit for tonight with care, asking Madame de Fer for any recommendation of fabrics that
could accurately match the Halamshiral staff uniform. Though his clothes did not allow him
immediate access to Ambassador Brialia's spy network, it did lessen the suspicious eyes on his person
from the nobles when he drifted among the endless colorful bodies to eavesdrop. "The Grand Duke
is still keeping tabs on that man. Do you think he will be a threat? Her Radiance's troops are already
stretched thin on the Exalted Plains."

"Hush, Lady Fleur. Not so loud," a manicured hand rested lightly upon the speaker's wrist, brushing
over the golden pommel of a hidden dagger as the pair glided to the doors of the Grand Library.
"These walls have ears: servants and chevaliers alike."

Solas was then left alone for the remaining of the minuet and through most of the gavotte. He closed
his eyes and dug his magic deep into the foundations of the palace - its history, as Empress Celene
had mentioned, was long: glamour, decay, and vengeance. He could not fathom how the humans
who live in the High Quarter were ignorant of their dangerous position when they were obviously
surrounded on all sides by a race that still remembered the Exalted March, the stories of the event
kept the burning fires present in the eyes of elven children, servants, beggars, and elders alike, alive.
"Mien'harel," the magic entrenched in the ground called out, promising retribution, "Fen'Harel
enansai."

"All eyes are upon you," Lady Josephine had warned before they entered the atrium, "Gain the
court's favor and all else will fall naturally." The rules of intrigue had not changed since he had fallen
into uthenera: the air crackled with the by-plays of power and machinations, of favors and the heady
tensions of sexual attraction. He used to maneuver effortlessly through his cohorts, allies, and
enemies - now he entertained himself by watching from the shadows. Half of him missed that
excitement where each word could bring any unsuspecting victim to ruin; the other half was tired of
the insincerities and betrayals that were as common as breathing.

"Solas?"

His ears twitched at the sudden presence by his side as he detected the familiar combination of
elemental, elven, and fade magic. "Inquisitor," he greeted, bending low at the waist, unprotesting as
Amell gently pried his fingers open and took the wine glass from his hand. "I am fine," he answered
her silent question, "I am better now," much better than his embarrassing fumbles towards the
beginning of the fete when he had grossly misjudged the potency of the liquor provided. He had
been careful to not lose enough inhibitions to jeopardize the mission and had, mind heavy and out of
focus, sequestered himself in a lonely corner until he regained his self-control, which is where the
Inquisitor had found him singing softly in elvish.

He bore her magic's prodding as it scanned his body, swept across his head, playfully tipping back
his hat, with patience. After her brief survey, she decided, "well. It seems so. You look better than
the last time I stumbled upon your inebriated form," after making sure that they were not seen, she
tossed him his keeper robe, "Just in time too. Get dressed. Vivienne and Sera are behind the door and
they're getting impatient. We're going hunting."
"She never offered me a boon in all the years that I've stood by her side," Solas lamented, taking great care to keep his words eloquent and unslurred, as he tapped against the chain holding her fire opal pendant with two fingers, "I was not at her side, simpering like all the other followers but I had thought that she cared..." he exhaled, slowly listing to the side until Amell grabbed his shoulders, catching him before he collapsed to the floor in an undignified heap, "the Fade shows me so many paths of possibilities, the interpretations, the past, the future. Ame amin lothi amin noamin... Ir abelas, Mythal."

"This pendant was from Flemeth," she corrected as her arms tightened around him, bringing him back to his unsteady feet, "not Mythal."

"My mistake, Inquisitor" he shook his head, leaning back against the window pane, "I've heard of stories of the Asha'belannar and her tragic tale reminded me of the All-Mother." He trailed off, words softening as he picked up from where he left off singing _I am the One_. Closing his eyes, he felt the Inquisitor's magic as a warm furnace at his side, gentle fluctuation like the rising and falling waves of the sea. "Ame amin lothi amin noamin heruamin..."

"Telandas."

Freezing mid-word, Solas cracked open one eye, "Did you say something?"

Amell glanced up from the hefty packet of documents she had been sorting - he briefly scanned them, recognizing them as incriminating evidence that Sister Nightingale would be delighted to get her hands on. "No," she arched a brow at him, grey eyes peering at him with many unspoken questions - he could only bring himself to answer the safest ones, "I didn't say anything." She pressed the flat of her hand against his forehead, frowning, and then, straightening, tucked the notes into a hidden satchel, "I should go. I'll send someone along with a glass of water." He closed his eyes, wondering if auditory hallucinations was a side effect of the wine. A wave of healing magic relieved some of the pressure behind his eyes, "Take care, Solas. I'll fetch you later."

"Staff members are disappearing into the Grand Apartments," Amell debriefed the group as they cut through the servant quarters, taking a right along the corridor. "If Corypheus managed to find a way to assassinate the empress and throw Orlais into chaos, then he has an informer who was close to the royal family."

"Or perhaps the informer is one of the royal family," the First Enchanter added as she narrowed her eyes at a requisition letter on chevaliers she picked up from a wooden bench by a cluster of embrium, "are we sure that Gaspard is not the perpetrator?"

"Be stupid to invite Quizzy to a party that he's trying to blow up, innit?" Sera pointed out, "He's one of those types that loves the open. Assassination is too secret-y." Her fingers played with the taut bowstring, thrumming it in a mockery of the ballroom music that they left behind, "Too much trouble coming here," she grumbled, "Why can't we just stick by Celene?" Solas pushed down the scathing retort that hinged on the tip of his tongue. Unlike him who secretly wished for Ambassador Briala to succeed, both the city elf and the Orlesian mage favored Celene Valmont's continued rule over the country - citing the fact that stability in the empire is more likely with an old ruler than new.

The gas lamps in the apartments were unlit, casting long shadows from the moonlight to the opposite wall where rows of portraits were framed in gold leafed wood and royal blue draperies held back by thick cords. Austere faces of the royal and long extinct Drakon family gazed sightlessly to the side, eyes averted. From the diamond at her staff head, Madame Vivienne produced a white beacon that
acted as a torch, lighting a path down the endless line of carved statues of Orlesian heroes.

Amell raised a hand, closing it into a fist - everyone stopped in their tracks, straining their ears to listen beyond the sounds of their own hushed breathing. Solas's ears suddenly pinned back against his skull as a minute shuffling sound increased beyond the western walls. "Sera," Amell whispered as they crept toward the ominous creaking beyond the one blackened door stained at the hinges with blood spatter, two hands gripping her greatsword, "stun them at the choke point, on my mark." Solas heard a small click as the rogue wordlessly notched an explosive arrow to her bowstring.

The door swung opened. A group of Venatori mages and harlequins cried out in surprise at the sight of them and tried to regroup behind the threshold - but by then, Amell had already cast a barrier and froze the first wave with a well aimed ice spell towards their feet. Shrapnel flew in all directions, ripping apart the paint on the walls and the cushioned upholstery. Vivienne's spirit blade slid between the ribs of the first gladiator she crossed blades with. Solas's summoned meteors managed to stun the remaining spellbinders but a harlequin had deftly dodged the incoming attacks and rushed forward, intending to create some space between herself and her enemies by slipping into the hall.

She rolled out of the immediate battle zone, about to disappear mid jump in a chameleon's breath just as Amell swung her sword, aiming for the rogue's tendons. Suddenly, flying from the south end behind the oak cabinet with two sickening thuds, two daggers found their mark in the harlequin's shoulder and lower abdomen. The harlequin screamed. Amell took advantage of the distraction, knocking out her opponent with a striking blow against the temple and, with a punishing kick, driving the dagger hilt deep into the woman's stomach, punging her through the balcony window.

After the crunch of bones breaking against hard pavement, after the group made sure that the Venatori stayed down, after they regain their breaths, they silently assessed their own injuries. Though no one received anything more severe than shallow cuts and burns, Madame Vivienne still chanted the incantation for Resurgence. Amell stepped cautiously over the shattered glass, peered down at the garden, and gave a low whistle.

"The plot thickens. There's a dead emissary down there too," she observed, wiping down and sheathing her sword. She turned and called out into the darkness, "Hello, stranger. We thank you for your assistance," glass crunching under her boots, to the crouched silhouetted figure who threw the two blades. Their mysterious accomplice stepped to the side, hands outstretched and visible to show a lack of weapons: a slight, elvish frame, dressed in emerald green and off-white colors in the style of a handmaiden, dark skin dotted with freckles, hair wound into a chignon, covered in magenta cloth. "Ambassador Briala, I presume?" Amell guessed as the other woman curtsied, "I've heard many stories about your exploits. Perhaps you can tell me which are true."

"Inquisitor Amell," Briala greeted, curiosity apparent in her eyes despite her mask, "A pleasure to finally meet your acquaintance. Allow me to first take you to the nearest facilities? Blood is harder to wash out once it dries."

Chapter End Notes

Behind the name: 'Daylen' is the default name of male human mage warden in Origins.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The Old Gods will call to you,
From their Ancient Prisons they will sing.
Dragons with WICKED EYES AND WICKED HEARTS,
On blacken'd wings does deceit take flight,
The First of My children, lost to night.

-Canticle of Silence 3:6

Vivienne

"How are you feeling, my dear?" Vivienne questioned as Amell ascended the stairs to the upper levels, gently grasping her wrist, searching for a quickened pulse. "Everyone heard your conversation with the Grand Duchess - it carried farther than the other couples'. May I commend you on a fine job? You've certainly impressed the court tonight."

"The Belle of the Ball," Amell commented wryly, flourishing both wrists, parodying the movements of Orlesian ladies when they are being coy.

"Though next time, I would not advise using that unsettling smile of yours," Vivienne continued, subtly pushing through the crowds that craned their next, trying to offer their compliments to the Inquisitor, "You polarize people's opinions of the Inquisition with that expression." Though in her personal opinion, what the observers saw in that smile was less of the Inquisitor's sardonic derision of the Grand Game and more of the enigmatic air that she surrounded herself in. The way she spoke, the way she interacted with the other guests, somehow heavily implied hidden power and knowledge. Vivienne could not tell if that effect was accidental or on purpose.

"The Inquisitor had spent the entire evening humoring us, Your Grace, when we had thought of her naive and vulnerable," Comtesse d'Argent had hissed behind a partially opened silk fan to Marquis de Chevin, "Don't believe me? Look at her spymaster, Sister Leliana: she is beside herself in happiness. I don't know their methods, but they've been busy tonight. Pray to the Maker if she talks to you. Already four noble houses have been... convinced to align themselves with the Inquisition."

And to think that in the beginning of the evening, few nobles condescended to converse with the members of the Inquisition. With the increasing awareness and surety among the lords and ladies that the Inquisitor was maneuvering into a position where she could possibly have the final say in who takes the throne, people who previously turned their noses at the "upstart heretical organization" positively scrambled to get into the three advisors' good graces. Even some of Vivienne's past acquaintance who had previously declared that they washed their hands of her when she made the decision to make the initial trek to Haven were begging for a private audience.

"I feel dirty," Amell groused as she wrung her hands, rubbing against the goosebumps along her arms. Vivienne weaved a minor illusion spell around themselves, gently guiding the Inquisitor to an empty divan and sat her down away from prying eyes. "Such a nice and accommodating woman,"
Amell's mused, eyes half-lidded akin to a lazy predator, "Grand Duchess Florianne. We'll need to keep closer tabs on her."

Vivienne frowned in consternation, "The Grand Duchess never received a gift of favor from the Dowager, despite her being well-versed in the Game. She's not a threat. You, dear Inquisitor, successfully asked a dance from Lady Mantillon even though you are considered a debutante," she contended, "Florianne's presence is barely tolerated as a low ranking member of Celene's cabinet and of the Imperial court." She received no reply, but the silence was telling enough that her reassurances were heavily doubted. "What did you whisper to the Grand Duchess' ear that left her speechless?" she asked, seeking the source of the Inquisitor's suspicions, "what did she say in return?"

Amell crossed her legs and leaned back, scanning the chamber, eyes resting on the various bards that interacted with the aristocracy, "I made a harmless observation, nothing of note. The Grand Duchess, on the other hand, offered us information against her brother - stated that he was a danger to any attempts at peace." She dragged an index finger along the velvet armrest, "She sends us to the Royal Wing."

Vivienne mulled over the information offered, "it's a trap," she concluded, for such intelligence was never given willingly without cause, clasping her hands together in her lap. *But for what purpose? And by whom?* Grand Duchess Florianne was in a unique position to vie for power, straddling both sides of the War of the Lions - but she had pushed for negotiations and did not agitate the contenders like Ambassador Briala. The lack of reason behind Florianne's motives was disconcerting.

"Of course it's a trap," Amell rolled her eyes, "What else could it be but a trap?" Giggling into a hand, she dreamily reminisced, "The last time I walked knowingly into a trap, I fell into an apocalyptic future. The time before that, the conclave in Haven exploded, the skies ripped apart, and I was lauded as the Herald of Andraste. Yet, despite my reluctance, I can't ignore the way duty calls," the Inquisitor smoothly stood to her feet, pushing her hair back with one hand, "Follow me. I spotted Sera talking with some of her Red Jenny contacts by the guest garden. Maybe Solas would be nearby; he's been trying to teach her Arlathan history since he first met her, still hasn't given up despite her being against all things elvish."

Did this mean that the Grand Duke was planning on allying himself with Corypheus in order to claim his birthright? This was not Gaspard's preferred method of conquest. As far as Vivienne could deduce, none of the three candidates betrayed any connections with the Elder One or the Venatori. Still, the lack of anything incriminating doesn't immediately eliminate them from the potential list of enemies. Could the perpetrator(s) be... someone close to the royal family by blood or marriage? Florianne herself? A favored bard? A member of an overly ambitious, noble house?

"My darling Vivienne!" a voice simpered at her right - belonging to a woman dressed in classic Orlesian finery, a wide brimmed hat decorated with long plumage over a face painted in a special green dye that could only be found along the cliffs by the Waking Sea, "Did you miss us so much that you accompanied your Inquisitor to Halamshiral?"

"I can't be absent on such a night, Madame," Vivienne stepped back from her position by the statue of the lioness and executed shallow curtsy, "Your husband has brought you along? It is dangerous with all of these armed men about."

"My husband cannot stop me from enjoying any ball that I wish to attend," Lady Ghislain scoffed in her heavy Orlesian lilt, "Enough of the protocols. I will accept Calienne from you - you are, after all, considered family." Her fan snapped open across her eyes, revealing delicate embroidery of dual roaring lions, "though for how much longer, I do not know." Her eyes averted to the scene below, where the Inquisitor led
Florianne into a waltz, "How goes your search for a snowy wyvern, First Enchanter?"

Vivienne's lips pursed in displeasure, "About as successful as Gaspard's search for any allies within the Inquisition," Lady Calienne stiffened at the implied insult. "Both Celene and Briala are stronger contenders - though they will not fight the outcome, the gentry has not forgotten who started the civil war." Her eyes and ears trained on the dancing couples below her as they began to slowly spin.

The fan fluttered open and shut, "As if Empress Celene has any claim left - they hold her unwillingness to produce a heir against her." The lady criticized, "I do hope that you, pardon me, the Inquisition are not planning on having the empress and the ambassador rule together? There has been whispers among the people that Celene is willing to allow her old handmaiden a seat by her side - having been impressed by the power Briala had accumulated. Half of us do not believe that they will last long together." She released a breathy sigh, neck craned back as she admired the chandeliers, "Is the mutual love apparent between them similar to the one between Gaspard and I or you and my dear father? I hold reservations."

"Your marriage to the Grand Duke did not contain any frivolous romanticism," Vivienne shook her head, "You married up to equal your importance with that of Laurent and Bastien."

"It was a marriage of choice, of partnership, of mutual respect. I can rest easy knowing that Gaspard will not murder my loved ones on a whim because of the consequences - Briala cannot claim the same," Lady Calienne sniffed haughtily, "Of course I married up. You see, unlike the Grand Duchess of Lydes, I did not languish with the knowledge that I was the least important member of my house. I am a greater player than her in the Grand Game." The pair of them watched as the Inquisitor dipped her partner in an exaggerated fashion, drawing a polite applause from their audience.

"As of this hour, the Inquisitor is greater than all of you," Vivienne steadily replied as the orchestral music died down. "I'll take my leave, Calienne." A closed fan tapped on her left shoulder; the Orlesian lady's eyes flashed dangerously in muted anger.

"Watch your words, mage." She lowly hissed, "don't place all your hopes onto Celene. When you find the mercenaries that Gaspard had smuggled into the Winter Palace, and you will, eventually, in your investigations, you might also find the empress's soldiers who allowed the intruders in. Ask them whose orders they are obeying." Her snarl quickly rearranged back into a simper, "Have a wonderful evening, Madame de Fer."

The Ferelden mercenary captain that the group stumbled upon and had to save from a small hoard of wraiths was quick to place the blame of his party's invasion on the Grand Duke's shoulders. He was also quick to throw down his weapons and groveled at Amell's boots once he got a good look at his rescuers, "You... You are the Grey Warden!"

Amell froze as the man started trembling, "I am a grey warden," she hesitantly affirmed, trying to dislodge her leg from his stubborn grip, shooting panicked looks at her companions who all pointedly took a step back.

"You are the Hero of Ferelden," he declared, "I was there when you saved Redcliffe! I joined a mercenary company to feed my family after the Blight ruined our crops. Forgive me. I am at your mercy!" He continued to ramble, a combination of adrenaline from having just survived an attack by demons and meeting his twice savior affecting his ability to regain his calm. As Amell urged him to find better job prospects, one option being to locate Commander Cullen within the palace and offer
himself as an agent, Vivienne exchanged an uneasy glance with the elven apostate.

As they had traversed the corridors to the forbidden Royal Wing, they had encountered and assisted one of Briala's spies dodging the lightning fast strikes from a harlequin and one of Celene's guards locking swords with low-level Venatori zealots, both of whom had been eager to offer a testimony against their superiors should the Inquisition ask for it. But even Lady Calienne could not have known about the demons roaming the area. "Bloody of course there would be demons," Sera griped, kicked at the disintegrating body of a fallen wraith, "Even in a ponce place like this." After sending the mercenary captain away, Amell walked over to a set of locked double doors that the wraiths had seemed to be guarding, tapping her sword gently on the frame, testing its strength. As she carefully laid an ear along the wood, trying to hear past the thick barrier, "Quizzy," the elf whispered, "your hand is glowing again."

Amell looked down in surprise, previously unaware of the crackling green magic that sparked from her palm. Her eyes swerved back up to the upper hinges, narrowed in thought. An open rift was just past those doors. This was what Grand Duchess Florianne had intended to send the Inquisitor to, whether it was for her own benefit, her brother's, the empress's, or a third party's.

("It's a trap," Vivienne had warned.

"Of course it's a trap," Amell had replied.)

A small surge of mana: fire traveled from the handle down the blade of Amell's greatsword. Vivienne drew out her spirit sword hilt and took a deep breath, maintaining her center serenity as she braced for the coming explosion. Amell took a wide step back, adjusted her grip, and swung.

Amell

"You must tell me what you said to the Council of Heralds to gain their favor!" Comte de Launcet urged over the violins as he guided them into an impetus, smoothly transitioning to a promenade position, "I have been petitioning them for an estate in Orlais to no avail. Kirkwall is no longer inhabitable for my family and dear Dulci descends into hysterics every time she steps out into Hightown. Please Inquisitor, in return for a voice with the Heralds, I'll offer you information on the qunari conspiracy at Chateau Haine and the reasons behind the death of Prosper de Montfort."

"- and not before I renewed my alliance with the empress. Still the elves suffer, more so than before Ambassador Briala took their burdens as her own. At least less chevaliers are visiting the alienages," Comte Pierre de Halamshiral muttered as he executed a perfect rotation. Amell pivoted under his upheld hand, steps matching his turns, "war is sickening, is it not, Inquisitor?"

Countless dances had blurred into her memories until all she could remember was what each of her partners whispered into her ear, asking for a favor, for her advisors' agents, for a good word - each gave their own opinion who should be crowned ruler of the empire, hoping that their words could influence her judgment. I feel dirty. For the genteel class, this was still a game: the Grand Game. She wanted to throw these men and woman into the heart of battle in the Exalted Plains and see how they would fare against the corpses that they indirectly sent onto the field.

"The chevaliers, the guardsmen, the soldiers," Amell had muttered, a week before the planned trip to Halamshiral, shifting a construction piece over to the Point Agur landmark on the world map. She had sat on the war table, idly swinging her legs as she organized a group of contract builders to the Dales, "when you ask them - some of them could barely recall why they were fighting. They
were...” not dead, at least, not on the outside. There was that blankness that she recognized in Hespith's eyes, in the survivors of Denerim after the recovery from the Fifth Blight, and in her own after she stumbled out of the Sloth Demon's realm in the Fade. The nobility refused to see.

"It is why you are willing to attend the negotiations at the Winter Palace," Cullen had said quietly, marking down the status of the eastern and western ramparts as 'laid to rest': the only advisor still awake and working at such an ungodly hour. He brushed his thumb over her hand - a subtle gesture of comfort, "You act for the people."

"You seem like the efficient sort. It must be the Ferelden in you," Comtesse Solange Montbelliard, whom Amell danced with just before the Grand Duchess made her own offer, linking elbows as they walked to the set tempo back to the edge of the floor, "Can you fix our mess, Inquisitor?"

Can you fix our mess, Inquisitor? Why am I the one designated for this monumental task? Is there no one else available? Hours later, as she sprinted past the Jardin de Reverie, past the courtyard, the knowledge of the Grand Duchess's duplicity ticking away at the back of her mind like an hourglass down to its last grains of sand, back to the ballroom, those words still plagued her mind: Can you fix our mess, Inquisitor?

Amell burst into the chamber amid screams of horror. 'I have half a mind to take your mess,' she thought darkly, 'and shove it down your unwilling throats.' Arms outstretched, holding the double doors apart, her gaze flitted about the arena, to the dying empress who was trying in vain to stem the blood flow from her abdomen, a silver blade peaking through stained blue velvet - backstabbed -, to the Grand Duchess who stood proudly over her, declaring the deed done in the name of her brother, at the guests stunned, frozen like statues, to each of the members of the Inquisition, and receiving a raised eyebrow in turn, silently asking her how they should proceed. She rolled her shoulders back in anticipation, flicking a wrist forward before closing her hand into a fist - no one besides her own people registered her arrival. All the better. On my mark.

The Grand Duke was rooted in his position as the assassin continued to heap accusations onto his shoulders. The crowd avidly listened: open rapture - this was still a game. "What have you done, sister?!" He demanded, drawing his shortsword and assuming guard position. His shaking arms betrayed how much he did not wish to attack her and she knew it, judging by the smirk that settled on her features.

"Do not complain about my results," Florianne replied as the empress gasped through a mouthful of blood, sinking to her hands and knees, "Is this not what you wanted?"

Before the man could get a word of denial in edgewise, he was interrupted by a creaking sound originating from the upper rafters where the light of the chandelier could not reach. A barely discernible outline of emerald green and off-white figure descending... A flash of dawnstone against silverite: Florianne deflected the blow with little difficulty. Briala leaped back, digging her heels into the floor, knees bent, lips curled back in a feral snarl, a dagger in each hand clutched in a reverse grip. The elven woman rushed forward. Muttering a long string of expletives under her breath, Amell quickly summoned her mana, weaving a spell around her arm as she flash stepped across the ballroom.

A couple things happened at once: Florianne parried Briala's second attack - the high pitched metallic ring suddenly roused the audience from their stupor. Venatori agents and harlequins crawled out of the woodwork, threw down their disguises, emerged from the shadows - taking advantage of the panic to attack the vulnerable guests. The Inquisition promptly responded, pulling out their hidden weapons and engaging the intruders, herding the bystanders away from the bloodiest parts of the
fray. Cullen shouldered aside a Venatori stalker and dealt three quick blows in succession to a gladiator's head. Leliana dashed in front of Josephine, knocking back a killing blow with her own stiletto knife before lashing out at the offender's neck.

Suddenly, the Grand Duchess's entire body stiffened, standing still as if time did not pass through her - a glowing blue glyph of paralysis materialized beneath her feet. "Stand down! Stand down, I say!" she frantically ordered as Amell took one of her crossed arms and raised it up, for a second mimicking their earlier dance together, before kicking the woman's back, and forcing her onto her knees. The chaos flickered out like a dying candle. "You don't dare to kill me," Florianne declared, though she looked less certain when she received a noncommittal hum in return. "You can't." The chamber grew heavy in its silence - the attempted coup barely lasted half a minute before it was over.

"You know, Grand Duchess," Amell's amused voice echoed off the polished floors, the glittering walls, the white wainscoting, "when you told me that you weren't satisfied with Lydes and I told you that you lacked ambition - this wasn't what I had in mind." Her greatsword was poised at the woman's neck, pressed against the skin in a manner that the slightest movement would draw blood. She craned her neck back, locking eyes with Briala's, "Ambassador, can you check the empress?"

Breathing heavily, the elven lady tucked her weapons away, offering one last poisonous look at the Grand Duchess, as if daring her to break free of the spell trap, and scaled the walls, bypassing the stairs, to Celene's side. Briala gently turned her over, skittering fingers palpating the wound, assessing; she pressed two fingers against the woman's jugular vein, "there is no pulse. She's gone," she announced, voice shaky from adrenaline, as she straightened, wiping bloody fingers against her skirt.

Exhaling loudly, Amell reached over and grabbed a fistful of Florianne's hair, yanking it back to expose her neck further to her blade. Glancing up, she inclined her head to the two candidates to the throne, "Your verdict for the traitor? Grand Duke? Ambassador?"

Briala did not hesitate. "Death," her hands clenched so tightly that her knuckles whitened.

"Death," echoed the court in unanimous agreement.

Grand Duke Gaspard wavered in his decision, staring at the back of his sister (she refused to look up), reduced to a mere criminal that tried to sell the entire country to one of the seven original Tevinter Magisters, "death," he agreed reluctantly. The audience below murmured their displeasure and rustled in agitation: they did not miss his one visible moment of weakness.

"I wish to prove that I am greater than what these people expect from me," Florianne admitted as Amell swept them past the orchestra, fast beat steps across the marble.

"This is the moment where you can spread your influence, Your Highness," Amell politely ignored the way her partner's nails dug into her shoulder. "It's an opportunity that I wouldn't squander."

Grand Duchess Florianne made a moue, "Do you think so?" She released a breathy sigh, voice low enough that Amell was not sure if she was suppose to hear the next comment, tinted with melancholy "Alas, if only we had met earlier, Inquisitor."

Grand Duchess Florianne's head rests by the dead body of the empress, waiting to be picked up by the servants. As the lords and ladies attempted to recover from the shock of the death of their ruler and the knowledge that their beloved society was almost plunged into something worse than war, Grand Duke Gaspard waited for Amell to clean off her blade with Florianne's skirt, before inviting her and Ambassador Briala to the balcony to begin the peace talks anew. Amell agreed after
receiving reassurances from Cullen that the surviving members of Florianne's agents were secured with no chance of escape or further escalation of the pandemonium tonight.

The night air was cool against her skin. Rolling clouds covered up the constellations on the southern expanse of the night sky. She breathed in the scent of crystal grace and embrium. Briala stood at her right, arms folded, one hip propped against the balustrade, nearly vibrating with tension. She and Amell exchanged a wordless look that Gaspard failed to catch - the question of who will succeed Celene Valmont still lingered in the air. Gaspard, however, believed that the answer was quite obvious, "There is only one choice left, Inquisitor," he said, referring to himself, "and I would greatly appreciate your support for my claim. Anything less and we would be back where we started."

Briala stepped forward, hands ducking into her skirt pockets, "The people inside won't forget that it was your sister who killed Celene. Do you honestly think that I would stand aside and watch you assume the throne?" She smiled sweetly, "I will use all the power at my disposal to prevent you from becoming emperor."

Amell rubbed her temples, "Enough from both of you," she groaned just as Gaspard opened his mouth to retort, dropping all pretenses of her refined persona that Vivienne had tried so hard to cultivate. She clapped her hands together, "here is what is going to happen," she offered them both a wane smile, bordering on unsettling, entirely insincere, "Gaspard. A little nightingale told me of your illustrious history." The man took a step back, "If you are that desperate to rule," Amell continued, "then I'll feel terrible taking the title away from you. No. No. I'll let you sit on the throne."

Briala arched a brow and clarified, "just sit, Inquisitor?"

Amell stayed silent but that absence was telling enough. "What are you saying?" It took Gaspard two seconds to understand what the two women were implying before he sputtered in anger, "What?! You cannot do this!" He shouted, slicing the air before him with his hand, "Putting a handmaiden on the throne? An elf? An outside power deciding the future of Orlais? Remember who extended the peace accord invitation to you!"

"And I was not impressed with your methods," Amell smiled, silently daring him to draw his sword, "And I'm sure that the court won't be either."

Leverage was such a nice word for extortion. The man gritted his teeth and scoffed, "No one will believe your word over mine," he challenged. But when Amell sighed, not loosing one bit of her own composure, he warily asked, "What do you know?"

Amell's eyes grow innocently wide, "Everything." She allowed that word to hang between them, "You might find some papers gone from your sister's study and from the hidden safe behind the portrait of your father. I'll also be taking back a Ferelden mercenary with me to Skyhold. He talks a lot. But if we're coming to an understanding, then you needn't worry: his transport will be kept discrete," she paused, "Emperor."

So furious that he could not find the words to express his thoughts on becoming the first puppet ruler of Orlais, Gaspard stomped back into the adjacent hallway, out of public eye. The two women silently watched as he paced back and forth from lion statue to lion statue. A minute later, barely suppressing an enraged roar, he punched the far wall, hard enough to create a sizable dent in the trim.

"Brute," Amell muttered, stepping over the threshold back indoors, eyeing the man's clenched fists, "Come Ambassador, we have to make sure that Emperor Gaspard doesn't slip his tongue in his anger during the announcements." She glanced over a shoulder when she was met with silence, "Briala?"

Briala's hands were wrapped around the elven locket that Amell had given her earlier in the night
Amell carded a hand through her hair, chewing on her lower lip in thought. "With how she acted? I would not know for sure." Celene didn't strike her as the type to hold anything sacred. However, she did not make it a habit to speak ill of the dead, opponent or not.

Tucking away the memento below her neckline, Briala set her shoulders back, squaring her jaw, "It matters not," she decided, "That is of the past now." And her future is in the shadows behind the throne to one of the most powerful countries in Thedas.

"You have a lot of work ahead of you," Amell remarked as they followed Gaspard, who had since his outburst calmed down, to the ballroom where the Orlesian nobility awaited the news. "Don't mess this up. Please." There was an implicit understanding between them that that the Inquisitor held as much blackmail material over the Ambassador as the Grand Duke.

"I have dreamed of this moment," Briala whispered to herself as they watched Gaspard announce the final decision, as the crowd hesitantly cheered, able to sense that something was amiss in the final jostling for power. She turned to Amell and promised, "These turn of events that benefited me and the elves of Orlais - this could not have happened without you, Inquisitor. I will not forget."

Cullen

The night continued: heeled boots and dance slippers skittered around the blood stains on the floor, yet they still dance - orchestral timbres and spinning couples. "Protocol," Sister Leliana explained, Josephine behind her engaged in a private conversation with the Arcane Advisor to the Imperial Court, "Orlais's rule is secured once more. They must celebrate. In that context, a little bit of blood ceases to scandalize. Instead, it becomes thrilling." He shook his head, still unable to comprehend the other-worldly rationality of an Orlesian noble, and left the ballroom for some peace of mind. He wandered through the Hall of Heroes, through the guest gardens, through empty corridors that contained held clues of a recent fight and traces of lingering sounds, the rise and fall of waves against the coast... He blinked out of his reverie - her magic - she was close.

She stood on the corner of a lonely balcony, elbows on the balustrade, hands clasped together in front of her, face tilted in the direction of the moon. She had changed back into her dress: rich, dark blue with silver trimmings, fitted well for her lithe figure, its cut closer to Ferelden styles than those of Orlais. His eyes followed a trail of fabric wrapped around her hips, up under the corset, teasingly outlining the swell of her breasts, before finally arching over a pale shoulder. She did not notice his presence; her eyes were half-lidded, staring far away, deep in thought. He cleared his throat.

Amell's eyes refocused; she subtly shook her head and blinked at him, "Cullen," she greeted, pleasantly surprised, "How did you find me?" She canted her head back as he drew near, leaning into him as he threaded his fingers through hers. No longer did she sidestep every time he reached for her, such as in Haven, when his attempts at intimacy were met with wary suspicion. No longer did she heavily blush at every deliberate touch, such as the month immediately after he confessed his feelings. Slowly, painfully slowly, after she knew of his intentions, she had begun to reciprocate - prolonged eye contact, smiles that she reserved for him when they worked alone together, provocative insinuations spoken from quirked lips...

"I know that you tend to equate distance with solace," he gently squeezed her hand, "How are you?" How are you feeling tonight? He brushed her hair out of her face, tucking the strands behind
an ear, appraising her features: the overall weariness that pressed down on her shoulders, the exhaustion in her grey eyes. He had noticed how her hands had shaken when she yanked her sword back and how her eyes had widened for one brief moment in horror as she stared at the decapitated head of Grand Duchess Florianne, rolling slowly toward her...

She closed her eyes, the pulse at her neck jumping as she clenched her teeth, "Even as a Warden-Commander with recent desertion in the ranks, I've never executed anyone before," she admitted, "Alistair did, once - Loghain Mac Tir - during the Landsmeet at Denerim. He made it look so simple but that sort of - it's not for me... But here. There wasn't any choice. I did what I had to." He slid an arm around her waist, pulling her close as she kept talking, as if the person she was trying to convince was herself, "I had to. It's done. It's over. The Orlesian civil war is over."

"And the ceasefire could not have happened without you," he reassured her, reminding her of why she had originally agreed to join the negotiations and participate in the madness. The men and women in the Exalted Plains could return to their respective villages and homes, duty finished, setting down arms and slowly edging their way back to peace. Amell sighed, body sagging as she decompressed, stress pouring out of her like a sieve, slowly being replaced by calm acceptance. After making sure that the trauma would not leave a terrible, lasting impression, he leaned back, mirroring her stance, and pulled off his gloves, "Maker's breath. What a night," he sighed as Amell softly giggled, "No doubt, I wouldn't have been able to accomplish what you had done with equal amounts of success." Not many people can seamlessly inserted themselves in the middle of the storm that is Orlesian politics and somehow emerged intact, with a good handful of blackmail to hold over the remaining two sides of power that made Leliana beam in happiness.

"Be glad you didn't have to. They're all terrible people in their own way," referring to the three candidates, she scoffed, "I'll be glad to return to Skyhold and leave this place and," waving a hand to encompass the entirety of the Winter Palace, she continued, "its splendor, its magnificence, its... everything."

They lapsed into comfortable silence. The chill in the air had her press even closer, shamelessly leaching heat. (Somehow, it reminded him of the winter nights in Kinloch Hold when she would, familiar enough with him to know that he wouldn't retaliate, without warning, press her ice cold fingers against his nape, sighing in relief while he jumped in shock.) The frission that danced under his skin turned into a restless ache in his chest as time passed by - seconds, minutes - he could not tell. Ever since she gained the title of Inquisitor, her workload had drastically grew, increased and prolonged expeditions out into Orlais and Ferelden to find ways to chip away at Corypheus's army that left any personal time together with her fewer and far in between. He missed moments like this.

From across the gardens, from the open windows of the ballroom drifted the orchestral strings of a quartet as they concluded one piece and started another. "It's nice music," she reluctantly broke the peaceful stillness, peering over the balcony, fingers skimming low against the leaves of crystal grace.

"The last one of the evening," Cullen murmured, brow furrowed in thought as he gathered his courage, wanting to bestow upon her a fond memory of tonight to balance the trials and tribulations that she had experienced. "Amell," she glanced up, smiling encouragingly as he hesitantly continued, "We should... I - I don't believe I'll ever be able to ask you again but," willing himself not to falter or embarrass himself, he gave a low bow, and offered her a hand, smiling invitingly, "May I have this dance, my lady?"

"... You may, thank you." She placed her hand on his proffered one and intertwined their fingers, "I thought you said you didn't like to dance," she remarked, confusion and delight tinting her voice in equal measure.
"For you, anything," he promised and watched as a faint flush appeared across her cheeks, traveling slowly down beneath the neckline of her dress. His hand rested at the side of her waist, thumb rubbing small circles into the fabric as he led her through the steps of a classic waltz. She hummed along to the distant tunes, giggling when he slipped into an outside spin. She was close enough that he could barely detect the faint scent of embrium and elfroot from her freed hair. Her grey eyes flickered over him, examining the feelings he had left to bare, openly vulnerable, before her, as if trying to decide...

"Cullen. If I..." she started and then bit down on her lower lip: a nervous gesture: as her hand that had been splayed across his back pulled back to cup his cheek and lowered toward his jaw. Not daring to breathe, he waited patiently as quiet determination overcame her uncertainty, as she leaned forward, stepping closer, eyes fluttering close, and pressed her lips against his own. There was no enemy knocking on their doors, there was no certain death beyond the moment they shared, there was only the northern winds blowing behind him, her herbal scent surrounding him, and the dull roar of waves beating against the coast in his ears. Her first kiss was frantic, filled with desperation, what-ifs and "I may have felt something of you that goes beyond friendship - but it's too late to figure out any more. Good-bye, Cullen." Her second kiss was hesitant and chaste; it was -

When she broke apart, he let out a shuddering breath, a fire burning in his chest, threatening to consume his control. He rested his forehead on hers as she lowered her gaze to his lapels, her hands smoothing them over as the flush increased on her cheeks. She had given him a caprice coin - an old fashioned method of offering well wishes from lovers. She kissed him on her own volition. She chose him. He will not let her go. Then again, she had never left his mind in the past decade when they were apart. "I don't deserve you," he breathed.

She blinked at him, puzzled at the non-sequitur, "Neither I, you," she easily made the admission, unbothered by how his thumb, slightly trembling, came to rest against her lower lip, "And yet here we are. Together."

This time, he kissed her, tilting his head and coaxing her mouth to part. She yielded without protest, pressed against him - her arms wound around his neck as one hand buried itself in his hair. There was a lingering taste of champagne and chocolate from the banquet table. He hungered for... He wanted... He broke away (she whimpered at the sudden loss of contact Maker have mercy) and frantically summoned the remains of his control before he-Push the straps off her shoulders to reveal naked skin for him to mark. Take her on the balcony while no one is watching, the orchestra playing at a distance. Hook her legs around his hips as he pinned her against the railings and...

She was in a tantalizing state of disarray, lips bruised red, dilated pupils turning grey eyes to black. "How long?" she dazedly asked between labored breaths, completely undone by his ministrations, "How long did you want to do that?"

Since he officially knew her in Kinloch Hold. Since he saw her again in the war room in Haven. "Longer than I'd care to admit," he muttered as she rested her head onto his shoulder, trying to regain her bearings. She weakly laughed, sound muffled into his jacket. As he pieced together the remains of his composure, the distant orchestra rose in its final fevered pitch and finished, dying down into silence. After a moment of pensive consideration, the court politely applauded. The night was over. "Let's head back," he whispered into her hair; without looking up, she made a reluctant noise of inquiry, "They will be waiting for you."
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The Old Gods will call to you,
From their Ancient Prisons they will sing,
Dragons with WICKED EYES AND WICKED HEARTS,
On blacken'd wings does deceit take flight,
The First of My children, lost to night.

-Canticle of Silence 3:6

Morrigan

Curious to see as to how Amell would interact with her son, Morrigan lingered by the archway that separated the terrace from the room that held her eluvian, observing from afar. "Kieran, is it?" Amell knelt down until she met the boy at eye-level, "You have your mother's face and your father's eyes."

"Well met, Warden. Again." Kieran replied, voiced pitched lower than usual, indicating the presence of memories before his time.

"Oh," a noise of comprehension escaped her; she leaned closer and probed, "Is Urthemiel still in there?" The boy slowly nodded, an old countenance on a young face - a most unsettling dichotomy. However, Amell was not the average person and Morrigan had often wondered how the world shaped and created a woman whose inquisitiveness replaced her lack of primitive fear and how much luck was infused into the very threads that wrote her destiny. From her side pack, Amell dug out a Ferelden toy soldier, scuffed and chipped around the protruding corners. "I bought this about eight years ago. I was going to give it to you then when I was searching for your mother's whereabouts. But now I'm not so sure as it never occurred to me: do Old Gods play with dolls?"

Beside her, her dog, missing an ear and bearing battle scars of faded cross-hatches and burn marks from his mien to his haunches, whined and prodded at the boy’s knees with his muzzle. Absentmindedly stroking the animal's back, Kieran dutifully accepted the worn gift, "Not the tainted ones," he answered after long deliberation, "I don't know about those tainted no more."

"Kieran," Morrigan called out as she stepped out to the gardens, smoothly cutting into the conversation before Amell could make further inquiries, "The tutors that Lady Ambassador Montilyet had arranged for you have arrived. 'Tis best not to keep them waiting." The young boy gave Amell one last unreadable look, figurine still clenched in his hands, before obediently trotting away. Morrigan watched him disappear into an adjoining room with a fond smile. With a son such as him, one often wondered how much was Kieran and how much was Urthemiel. The ease he displayed traversing the Crossroads bordered on unnatural, sentences sometimes spoken with an otherworldly and sage air... and yet, he still struggled in simple arithmetic and multiplying single digit numbers, pouting whenever she arranged extra problems for him to solve.

"Do you think he would be willing to play with a golden nug statue?" Amell asked as Morrigan cross the grounds, staring at the dog who had nudged the aforementioned object out of her pack, happily gnawing on its head. "It's a grand enough gift."
The dog paused in his foolish gambols to bark at her. Morrigan returned the greeting with a nod, sighing in a long-suffering manner when he took the wordless reply as permission to give her boots a wet lick. "Will your hound warm up to my son as he did to me?" she asked as Amell tried to pry the statue from his tenacious hold.

"Dog knows that below your hard exterior, there is a squishy individual. Don't think I didn't miss all the times you snuck him herbs and scraps of rabbit - Wynne had wondered how he developed a strong tolerance for deathroot in such a short amount of time. With Kieran he's just," Amell briefly struggled to find the proper word, "uneasy. Don't worry. Eventually, Dog warms up to everybody... Except for Solas. Dog never warmed up to Solas." She tried to yank the nug out of Dog's mouth to no avail, "Let go, boy." Dog growled. "This is what I get for making impulse buys. Why can't you be satisfied with cake anymore? This thing costed me a fortune - it is not a chew toy."

Morrigan stood near their scuffle but did not make a move to interfere. "Tis a lure," she deduced from the engraved runes along the collar and the lingering scent of cave dirt permeating through small holes drilled into the sides.

"Your observation, Morrigan," Amell grunted as she successfully wrestled the statue away, "is always much appreciated." Dog released a pitiful whine; she tugged on his lone ear in quiet admonishment. Disgruntled, Dog loped off to join a group of children playing by the gazebo and potted plants.

"One could give it to the advisors for further investigation," Morrigan ghosted her fingers over the gleaming head and the many trails of saliva.

"Leliana. She loves nugs." As soon as the decision was made, Amell second guessed her choice, "Or maybe not. She'll need some time to calm down after -" the wayward movements of her hands attempted to explain, "I, ahh, didn't really stop you from impersonating her beloved ravens. When I last saw her, she was still sore."

"Amell, have you seen - Oh! Baron Plucky! There you are!" At the familiar voice, Amell almost dropped her handful of samples taken from dead greater terrors, eyes darting between Morrigan who was perched on the railings and the Spymaster who was quickly making her way from the stairs to their position. She blanched as the Spymaster picked up Morrigan, who squawked in alarm, and cuddled her close to her bosom.

"Umm... Leliana?" Amell tried as Leliana continued to fawn over the raven for a full two minutes, "Err... That's not..." After making several attempts to escape from the woman's hold, Morrigan resorted to clawing at the Spymaster's cowl, desperate to escape before Leliana did something that would be too humiliating to forget. "Oh dear." The intention of her transformation had been to avoid the more zealous residents of Skyhold who wished to guard the Inquisitor against the dreaded Orlesian Arcane Advisor, rumored to be a daughter of the Witch of the Wilds. Neither of the two had anticipated the subsequent events.

"Wait a moment," Leliana held Morrigan at arm's length, squinting her eyes at the plumage patterns, the bleary glare, narrowly avoiding the frustrated snaps of a raven's beak aimed at her fingers, "You're not Baron Plucky."

Amell winced, as did everyone else standing in the rookery, at the ensuing scream when Morrigan finally broke free and transformed back to her human form. The ringing in Morrigan's own ears persisted as she began her albeit childish taunts against the Spymaster that were reminiscent of the frequent verbal spars that they had during their journey through Ferelden a decade ago. Gathering the remains of her dignity and
staunchly ignoring those last few minutes, she scoffed, "Baron Plucky, Leliana? "Twould seem that your well of potential names has not improved since I last met you and your... Schmooples. Whatever happened to that pink pestilence?"

"There is Schmooples II." Amell helpfully offered before Leliana could retort, "Besides Baron Plucky, you've yet to meet Commander Caw - I see him in the rafters."

Turning red, fit to burst, as Morrigan's lips curled into a sneer, Leliana folded her arms and huffed, "Commander Caw is a perfectly good name for a raven that belongs to the Commander!" she defended, "Does it not make sense?"

Morrigan silently thanked her mother for instilling at some point in her childhood the good sense of choosing respectable names - she shuddered to think of the teasing Kieran would have endured from his various playmates should his name have been Schmooples. Amell's mouth did not twitch, "I'm not laughing at you," she soothed. Leliana remained unconvinced.

"You are not any better, Amell." Leliana sulked as she sank into her armchair, drawing alarmed looks from nearby scouts who had probably never seen her so off-balanced in the presence of old friends and acquaintances, "You named your mabari, Dog!"

With a noise of a wounded animal, Amell protested, "That was not my fault! Dog was supposed to be a placeholder for something better." She deflated at the combined flat stares from the other two women, "and the better name never made itself known until he got used to his placeholder." She sighed, "And now his name is Dog."

"Maybe not Leliana." Morrigan agreed, tapping a nail against the polished surface "This lure is designed for a bigger animal, possibly a mount. A soldier would have interest in mounts." Amell rubbed the golden nug dry with a sleeve, tucking it back into her bag, as Morrigan continued to ruminate, "how about that commander of yours... Commander Cullen? You seem to be very close to him." The ardor that the Commander showered her invoked a strong sense of familiarity with the one difference that this man's feelings were actually reciprocated. "Trading one blond ex-templar for another, are you?"

A peculiar shade of red emerged from below her neckline, rising upwards to her neck, "There was nothing going on between me and Alistair," she heatedly denied.

Pertaining to relationships, the entirety of the Fifth Blight could've been described by the phrase: one-sided attraction. She could not even begin to count how many moments Alistair dithered away with the rose in his hand. Then again, Amell wasn't responding (or even seemed to be aware) to his or any of the other party members' advances. Whatever possibilities there had been between the King and the Warden-Commander now Inquisitor was long gone. She wisely decided not to comment further.

For the next few hours, the two mages poured over Morrigan's notes of her experiments done on the eluvian and a copied treatise that she had borrowed from a Dalish clan. Amell contributed with ancient tomes that she had procured in her many wanderings throughout Ferelden. While Morrigan tried to theorize reasons why the mind altering perceptions of the fade would cause even the most mentally strong human some amount of disequilibrium while elves remained unaffected, Amell engrossed herself in the maps Morrigan had made of the nexus that connected the eluvians, "how frequently they must have been used," Amell wondered, "to think that they removed all need for roads. The power to create the realm of the Crossroads - useful, but dangerous."

Dual admiration and caution of ancient magics was implied in her last sentence, which spoke volumes of how much she has matured, mentally, since ten years prior when she had trekked through
Ferelden with a perpetual wide-eyed wonder and child-like eagerness to learn and explore. From a circle mage to a warden to a commander - even now she was evolving into something more. Perhaps... Perhaps Amell was not the Herald of Andraste but of something else. The world was starting to tremble with the sudden influx of changes stacking on its shoulders. The currents in the airs and waters whispered of a thinning Veil and the reawakening of gods.

"Inquisitor," Amell and Morrigan both turned towards the source of the interruption: the Chantry Mother's silhouette against the backdrop of the setting sun, "I'm sorry for disturbing you, but I have a letter from Magister Halward Pavus that requires your attention."

How many hours had passed since they began their studies? Four? Five? Morrigan straightened, gathering her belongings with a careless flick of her wrist. Lazily stretching out stiff joints, Amell accepted the proffered letter from the Chantry Mother and briefly skimmed the words, brows furrowing in confusion after she finished, "oh... But why would their retainer contact you, Mother Giselle?" before folding it into a neat square and tucking it into a pocket. Receiving a shake of the head as an answer, Amell carded a hand through her hair, "Well, good of you for bringing this to my attention." Mother Giselle murmured her thanks, motioning Amell to follow her into a more secluded spot where they can further discuss the contents. Amell glanced back, "It was nice catching up with you, Morrigan. We'll talk later," she promised.

Morrigan inclined her head, "Farewell, my friend."

Dorian

He was fairly certain that he was responsible for most of the tension crackling in the air - humidity and electricity combining into a summer storm cloud that doggedly followed him from the Gull & Lantern tavern back to the Frostback Mountains. His mount, a basking longma, was ill-tempered due to the trailing moisture to the point that the Inquisitor's red hart was careful to keep at least a length and a half of distance. The speed he had set ate the ground in a constant blur of green and brown with the occasional flash of scarlet from embrium blossoms - meanwhile, he struggled to find within him the strength to forgive his father.

"I prefer the company of men. My father," he spat out the words, as if the man he was pointing to barely deserved such recognition, "disapproves."

"Really?" Amell blinked, canting her head in way to express her befuddlement, "But why? Am I missing some cultural aspect here? Tevinter does not like homosexuality? I mean, most people are fine as long as you marry... Oh." She frowned, aiming all of her displeasure towards the other man. "But, he can't...he shouldn't... He's your father."

It was amazing, in retrospect, how one can follow the logic of twisted paternal love from "what is best for you" to something utterly horrific. To think that his father would rather risk every part of his son's personality and fundamental being of self in order to change his sexual orientation - as if nothing else that made up Dorian mattered to him besides what would contribute to the next generation of the Pavus legacy.

"Once I had a son who trusted me," his father intoned as the door closed behind the Inquisitor's retreating form. The words weighed heavily on Dorian, whose bitterness manifested as tendrils of lightning extending from the ceiling to the dusty floor, "A trust I betrayed. I only wanted to talk to him. To hear his voice again. To ask him to forgive me."

"I cannot forgive you," he answered as his magic cooled from seething rage to quiet
"Your actions indicated that you were never proud of me; you were proud of your ideal." He paced between the tables and the overturned chairs, eyes trained to the ground, hairs at his nape standing on end from the static pressure, "the next time I see you, if there ever is a next time, would be in Tevinter. I will not be there to return home - I will be there to force a change," to a nation that festered in lies, scheming and illusions of supremacy.

"Magister Alexius-"

"Is dead." Dorian briefly wondered how much information Felix presented to the Magisterium before he perished from the corruption. "I follow the ideals of the man he once was. You will not take those 'foolish notions' from me. You will not take me."
Pausing to regain his composure, he raised his head, shoulders back, chin up, and squarely met his father's gaze, "I will return one day," and we shall see how you will fare.

He thought, watching his father reluctantly make arrangements to return to Tevinter, that he had finally placed all that unpleasantness behind him and that this final chapter of his life had come to an end - which was why he was stunned into silence when, a week later during an expedition through the Emerald Graves, Amell asked him if he could ever consider forgiveness. He did not understand why she would request such a thing. "Are you not estranged from your family?" Dorian challenged, after she finished discussing with Fairbanks the pros and cons of reconciling the man with his noble roots, "Did you forgive your parents for sending you to the Ferelden Circle?"

A flicker of unreadable emotion passed her eyes, "What were the circumstances that my mother faced when she realized that her firstborn was a mage?" she countered, "Would she have risked raising me as an apostate like my cousins?" Amell shook her head, "Unlikely. At least Hawke had a mage father who knew how to train his children. By the time I had the opportunity to contact her, she had long since died. Nearly all of my family died. There was no one to be estranged from save for a penniless uncle. After that unpleasant revelation, I stopped trying to extend feelers into Kirkwall - Knight Commander Meredith was, uh, very paranoid. I didn't hear of Hawke then. I suspect that Anders was running interference..." She pinched the bridge of her nose, "I'm off topic - Anyways, what I do know is that my mother took great pains to send us to Circles with reputations of being relatively mage-friendly. That bit of kindness means a lot to me."

His mind latched onto one strange detail that he had to confirm, "us?" Dorian raised a brow, "You have siblings?"

Amell hummed, "It's not common knowledge - my brother and sister ended up in Ostwick and Markham respectively. I was the only one who crossed the Waking Sea." Dorian tried to imagine growing up in the Pavus household with children his age, modeled after the personalities of his mother and father, and shuddered. "I traded letters with them easily enough from Amaranthine for years. But then..." He didn't catch a glimpse of her expression, but he did note how her knuckles whitened around the reins, "the mage-templar war started and correspondence stopped on their end."

They stopped at the entrance of the Veridium Mine, inhaling the stale scent of cave scum, and dismounted. After sending off his dracolisk with a pat on the nose, Dorian squeezed her shoulder, "I would offer my condolences, but they ring a bit empty."

"I don't need them yet. They might still be alive, just... unable to write," her hope balanced on one small thread of chance; she refused to believe that the remaining members of her immediate family were casualties of war, numbering among the many dead. "My last letter from Solona warned me against any offers made by Tevinter supremacy mages." She kicked at a deposit of veridium ore. "It
made me wonder. What if the Amells lived in Minrathous instead of Kirkwall?" pivoting on her
heels, she critically eyed Dorian, her scrutiny pinning him down like a cat's paw on a mouse, as she
mused, "As a family of mages, we would've had at least some amount of respectability."

He started chuckling, "Respectability? You will received more than mere respectability, dear
Inquisitor. Your cousin is the Champion of Kirkwall and you are the Hero of the Fifth Blight,
arguably the strongest mage in all of Ferelden. At any point should your family ever decide to move
north, you would instantly gain at least two magister seats in the Senate. While I would highly
recommend against the migration, your life would be considerably easier in Tevinter." He pulled out
his staff, gem head glowing white, as the shouting from within the mine grew louder, "Funny how
the world works?"

"Simply hilarious." she agreed before disappearing into the mine. He followed her, casting a static
cage over the main infantry of Freemen who tried to ambush their position as she made quick work
of the stragglers with her conjured walls of ice. Two hours later, with the freed captives in tow and
the dead body of Sister Costeau behind them, she revisited the conversation. "Look, Dorian. I want
you to belong," she professed. "The Inquisition can be enough - and if you don't want to reconcile
with your family, I won't force you but..." She grew more subdued, "it gets awfully lonely at times.
I've been herding away some of your opponents but I know I haven't been completely successful. If
you're assured of your place here, then I'm happy to keep you with me."

Dorian understood the need for finding a niche and people who accepted him. His life was defined
by bonds of both blood and water and the misfits of the Inner Circle was fast becoming his second
family, a better family: it was becoming increasingly difficult to imagine life without Cullen
humoring him weekly with chess matches or even the Iron Bull's flirtatious and crude jokes. But he
wasn't blind to the malcontents. Since his arrival, people have made negative implications of his
closeness to the Inquisitor: the presence of an Imperium mage in her Inner Circle brought about
concerns that he was unduly influencing the leadership. Mother Giselle had broached the topic
numerous times, a representative of the majority opinion in the Skyhold, and had been rebuffed each
time. Dorian chanced a glance at Amell: self-assured, composed, adamant: at the very least, he knew
that he would always receive support from those who mattered.

Cullen

She bedecked herself in a strange combination of nightgown and armor pieces. "You should've
gotten used to this by now," she defended when his silence grew almost accusing as she tightened
the straps looped around her shoulders, checking her mail for any holes, before selecting a long
sword from the rack: silver blade, bronze cross-guard, black tape. ("I can't believe we have such nice
equipment to spare," she had once remarked, "I used to have the warden recruits fashion their own
weighted bundles of canes as personalized training swords.")

"The soldier within me will always be offended," he replied as he held the door open. "But by all
means, don't stop on my account." The night breeze rushed into the armory, bringing along stray
pieces of hay and leaves. The outside grounds were quiet save for the rustling of trees and the
crackling of newly lit braziers, bringing an orange glow to a moonless night. Above them stretched a
galaxy of stars, constellations inching across the canvass of black.

"That comment does not help relieve the rumors I hear claiming that you sleep in your armor," she
tossed back, amused, tapping the pommel of her sword against his breastplate as she walked past.
She sketched the vague border of the training grounds with her boots, her soft humming audible even
as he drew away from the door and moved to the adjoining room, browsing through the extensive
collection of weapons and shields.
Their nightly routine started shortly after the Inquisition settled into Skyhold on a quiet night when he, after finishing his written orders to his soldiers stationed in the Western Approach, as his second-to-last candle dwindled to the end of the wick and his hands began to shake from lyrium withdrawal and stress, decided to take a stroll through the fortress. Instead, he found her shivering and staring over the battlements in an exhausted daze. Recognizing her expression from when he had carried her from the herbalist's hut across the lake back to her cottage in Haven, he had brought her inside, pushing her into his chair and wrapping her in an assortment of blankets.

"Darkspawn, werewolves, fade creatures, darkspawn, demons, manic zealots, undead army, darkspawn, red lyrium, more darkspawn," she listed off with her fingers when he asked her why she hadn't retired yet to her bed. "I want to sleep. I really do."

"This is what the wardens have to endure?" He felt her forehead - cool and damp. "Drink this - the herbs will help you relax," he gently pushed a small cup of tea to her lips, watching as she took two meager sips, "Is this the first time the Calling prevented you from sleeping? Has it always been this bad?"

"I'm fine," she insisted, burrowing deeper into her makeshift shelter. "Corypheus... Corypheus just realized that I'm still alive. He's... annoyed." Cullen traced over the prominent circles lining her eyes, frowning: she always had a penchant for understatements. He wondered how intense the Calling will grow, how far Corypheus's fury will spread, especially once he realizes that the Inquisition, fueled by faith, conviction, and desperation, is still actively working against him with their knowledge of the magister's desolate future.

"Amell, look at me." Her gaze shifted upward to meet his - bright, grey orbs reflecting the candle light, glazed and fever-like. She smiled wanly at him as he quietly fretted: it wasn't fair that while she was able to help him when he was battling the worst of his lyrium addiction, creating rejuvenating potions for him whenever the tremors and cold flashes returned, he was helpless as she suffered through her own brand of nightmares and hallucinated voices. Of the many times that she had slept in his chair to escape from the daily commotion of the Inquisition, he couldn't help but listen to her words uttered in the midst of her dreams - and do nothing more than shake her awake whenever she began to jerk in fright.

"- madness takes you - life of fragile things that break when-"

The solution that he ended up proposing came from his own experiences with insomnia, used quite often in the Templar order for those whose addiction to lyrium outpaced the weekly shipments made to the Circles. The methodology revolved around the idea of clearing the mind, forcefully pushing out the restless thoughts that plagued the fatigued self. While some used meditation, others relied on the physicality of spars - total concentration of the body in motion as a way to remove distractions in the brain.

"We'll give it a try," she decided, when he suggested the idea, "though you should know that without magic to cover the holes in my form, I'm woefully inadequate."

"All the better," he maintained, recalling all too clearly how she fared after the attack on Haven, how she had been when he carted her back to the mountain camp. If only she hadn't accumulated all those small cuts, had prevented that much blood loss, each slip sliding her into exhaustion and the possibility of a cold death. If only he had made preparations for a what hindsight told him was an inevitable assault. If only the
Inquisition had not been so weak. *Never again.* "I need to come up with new training regimens for my soldiers. It'll also keep me from becoming complacent."

"You're hardly rusty," she rubbed her eyes with the heel of her palms, following him down the stairs to Master Harrit's smithy where the embers still glowed beneath the black coals, "I've seen you spar with Cassandra. Her blows are unforgiving; I don't understand how you still remain standing after a session with her."

The door creaked at the hinges as he emerged from the armory - cold air lightly caressing his skin. She waited for him by the crates and barrels, swaying slightly on two feet, three fingers pressing against her temple as if warding off a headache. Her eyes narrowed at his choice of weaponry, "a grey warden shield?" she muttered, giving her blade a couple of practice swings, "you're mocking me, Commander."

He tapped the blunt edge of his sword against the dual griffon head heraldry, a smirk playing against the edge of his lips, "I would never," he bent his knees, "Ready when you are, Inquisitor," digging his heels into the ground as she shifted her weight forward, poised on the balls of her feet, before ducking fast to his left side.

Her style could not be categorized as easily as his - but like any other fighter in Thedas, though there was room for improvement, there were no glaringly obvious holes in her stance. He recognized some basic templar forms that he had taught her long ago during their time together in Kinloch Hold - and some original, complex choreography that he attributed to years of fighting opponents that were, on average, larger than her. In decidedly non-templar regulation armor and small stature, she had more flexibility in movement, slipping in and out of his range like a rogue shadow. He parried every one of her blows, the vibration of metal against metal ringing in his ears, echoing to his teeth. Her gaze focused upon his shoulders and hips, trying to predict his next move, trying to ascertain any weak spots to exploit, eyes narrowing in frustration when she couldn't find any. They continued along this line, neither one truly giving or taking, for at least a half hour.

But, unused to prolonged one-on-one skirmishes, she was growing impatient and reckless. He inwardly grinned as she gritted her teeth and slowly circled him. Spinning around, she side-stepped the high swings of his sword - but did not anticipate his new counter to her pommel strike - a low aiming, modified shield bash that Cassandra had recently taught him, a favorite in the Seeker arsenal to create space and unbalance opponents.

Her eyes widened: without any preparation to brace against the maneuver, she overcompensated as she attempted to dive to the side, but instead flipped into the air as the edge of his shield clipped her side. She crashed into him; unprepared for the sudden impact, a rush of breath escaped him the moment they landed in an disorganized heap, weaponry scattered about.

Supine on the ground, he stared at the scattered stars and the high walls of Skyhold in his periphery, as Amell groaned into the crook of his neck as she attempted to extricate herself from their tangle of limbs, "I'll never get used to the feeling of having bruises where bruises never ought to be." She stretched, wincing as she tested a few muscles, "You've improved," she reached out and playfully tugged at a strand of his hair as if expecting it to curl, "You'll be able to single-handedly defeat three red templar horrors by the month's end. Samson will never know what hit him."

He pulled himself upright, "That is the plan," he grumbled as he pulled out a small vial of elfroot potion from a secure pocket, "Here. I'd imagine the horseback ride to Crestwood tomorrow wouldn't be all that pleasant without this." Gratefully accepting the gift, she uncapped the small bottle, drank half, and poured the rest down the left side of her collar, making a pleased sound as she rolled her shoulders back with minimal ache. He reached for her hand, thumb pressing on the mark of the rift,
"How are you feeling?" She blinked at him - the shroud that had covered her eyes when she first knocked on his office door earlier in the night had cleared.

The red pendant sitting over her chest swayed as she shifted, glowing dimly from an inner light. "It was stronger tonight," she admitted, rising to her feet, "I think he just found out our role in the peace conference at Halamshiral. He's furious that Orlais did not fall."

"And now?" He prodded as they made their way back to the armory.

"Better. More relaxed. Before, I was close to jumping out of my own skin. You helped," she assured him, depositing her armor pieces back into their places on a wooden manikin. "You always help." Her fingers brushed against his; she turned to steadily meet his gaze, "I know I've said this countless times already - but... thank you."

He rested a hand over the small of her back as they stepped back out to the open air, "Always," he murmured, "Shall I escort you back to your quarters?"

"A bath and a bed: they both sound so lovely..." her voice took on a quality of dream-like longing. "But... you," she peered up at him, "you'll sleep too, after this?" He turned away, hand rubbing the back of his neck as he thought about the pile of documents on his desk that still needed to be sorted through - signatures, notations, requisitions... "Cullen," she exasperantly admonished, tugging half-heartedly at his sleeve.

The walk back to her accommodations was filled with idle chatter. The conversation drifted from the benefits of working at night to personal health to Ferelden foods. He regaled her with short description of Ambassador Josephine's polite distaste when she realized the relative simplicity of the recipe of Ferelden cookies. She returned with a short retelling of Sigrun and Oghren's heated argument one evening over supper regarding whether there were four or five different ways to spit-roast a nug, "They had a competition that lasted for an entire week on who was the better cook: forced my wardens to sample all their dishes. Warden Constable Howe still has the occasional nightmare of those animals with tiny wings, flying around his head - he hasn't forgiven either of them for the trauma."

The double doors to the throne room gave way to an empty chamber, the scents of candles and torches still lingering in the air after having long been blown out. Their footsteps echoed through the darkness, slowing as they allowed their eyes to adjust to the increasing blackness, voices dropping to hushed whispers.

At the door to her quarters, she kissed him good night, a habit that she had picked up after they had returned from Halamshiral. He cleared his throat, about to wish her safe travels when she paused with her hand on the doorknob. Craning her neck back, she stared at him for a few heartbeats, considering... before pivoting on her heels, gently touching his cheek and capturing his mouth again. However, in this instance, she did not keep her actions chaste: she playfully bite his lower lip, deepening the kiss as she gripped his pauldron and tugged him forward. He stepped closer, pushing her until her back hit the door. She whispered shyly against his mouth, "You're welcome to join me, if you'd like."

It took him a moment to register her words before his vivid imagination brought to fore dreams that he'd fantasized on late nights - her hair splayed over the pillows, her fingers digging into the sheets, begging, "Maker... Cullen, I need you." He groaned into her mouth, "Amell, are you sure?" He whispered: he had been patient for so long - for her to become comfortable in his presence, for her to set the pace of their relationship. Barely a week has passed since the Inquisition returned from the Orlais peace conference. "It's- It's not too soon?" Even as he asked, he gripped her thigh under her nightgown, hooking her leg around his back, his other hand moving to the doorknob.
"I'm sure." she affirmed, gasping as he grounded his hips against hers, "Cullen. I've never felt this way-" She was cut off by the creaking of the double doors opening and another set of footsteps reverberating along the walls.

"Commander?" A wave of frustration coursed through his body at the familiar voice of one of his soldiers on night patrol, "Commander Cullen. Are you in here? I have some reports that need to be reviewed..."

The spell between them broke and he was instantly reminded of a similar occurrence back in Haven where he was interrupted by one of his men just as he tried to confess his feelings to her (his second time was much more successful). The window of opportunity closed in his face as sudden as it had been offered. He released a heavy sigh, burying his face into her neck as she started to shake with quiet mirth, "Don't try to kill him. I hope you'll see me off tomorrow when I head back to Crestwood." She murmured as she smoothed down his hair, offering one final kiss over the scar on his upper lip, "Good night, Cullen." She slipped past his hold; he watched the door shut behind her and wiped a hand across his face.

Then he turned, walking out to the dim brightness and sharp shadows offered by the torch in the soldier's hands. Cullen folded his arms, "I hope," he told the frozen man whose eyes darted at everything but him, "for your sake, that this is an emergency."

The soldier blanched.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

HERE LIES THE ABYSS. the well of all souls. From these emerald waters doth life begin anew. Come to me, child, and I shall embrace you. In my arms lies Eternity.

-Andraste 14:11

Carver

Carver Hawke: renegade warden. Location: a cave so moist that it was nearly impossible to navigate the passageway without stepping onto at least one cluster of deep mushrooms. Affiliation: alone, save for a mentor whose repeated flare ups struck like clockwork at sundown, accurate to the point that they could work their schedules around his fugue states without much issue.

"No sign of Clarel's people or the Inquisition?" Stroud rasped as Carver tended to the fire, as sparks drifted up through a small opening in the cave, rising to meet the low overcast, the signs of thrall disappearing from his features as the skies grew ever darker.

"None," he replied, flexing his gauntlet hand and squinting upward past the grey smoke.

"We haven't got much time left. The Calling is growing stronger," Stroud coughed, "And you? You still haven't heard the faintest voices?"

"No." He had, when this whole mess had started, theorized that his resistance was due to the ritual father had participated in during his term of service in the Vimmark Mountains.

Blood magic in Kirkwall, blood magic used by Merrill, his brother, and his father, blood magic that killed his mother, blood magic in the warden initiation ritual, blood magic locking Corypheus in the Warden Prison Tower, blood magic unleashing him into the world... He wasn't quite sure what to think about regarding that branch of magic anymore. On one hand, the immunity allowed him to view the situation without that suffocating desperation and plaguing nightmares - a third party perspective to fully comprehend the insanity that somehow overcame the Orlesian wardens who, between respect for Clarel and pride in the organization, decided that summoning a demon army to end all future Blights was a brilliant idea. On the other hand, almost any other problem in his life could be traced back in some manner to blood magic.

Whose fault was it? Who was responsible for the horrors unleashed upon the world? For the rips in the veil, the fade creatures wandering the lands? His father's? His brother's? Senior Warden Janeka? Warden Commander Larius? Nobody knew that ancient darkspawn magisters do not die so easily. Sighing, Carver stood to his feet, brushing off the streaks of ash that stained his pants. "I'm heading out to gather firewood," he tossed over his shoulder as he fastened his sword, Seeker of the Grey, to his side.

Stroud raised a hand in acknowledgment, watching the fire die down to embers, "I believe that my latest letter has reached your brother. Keep an eye out for any sign of the Inquisition and be careful."
His shadow wavered, rising and falling on the face of the cave wall. Carver made a noise at the back of his throat as he finished the last buckle - keep an eye out and be careful? Easier said than done. It was impossible to venture near the Inquisition camps - Clarel had men stationed near their vicinity, as if daring him to try to make contact, having deduced that she had most likely made an enemy out of the Inquisition but wary to poke the sleeping dragon out of fear of swift retaliation. After all, without Stroud and Carver, the Inquisition didn't have enough information on the Orlesian wardens to act.

Because of Clarel, he hasn't had contact with any hints of civilization for nearly a year, news trickling to his ears via the occasional traveler, having passed through so many mouths that he could barely separate truth from fiction. The monotony of living on the run, day in and day out with senses on high-alert, was beginning to chafe on his psyche. His collection of dried bear pelts had grown so ridiculously large that he could layer them to make a decent mattress and still have enough to cover him for winters nights (- where did all the bears come from? Wasn't Ferelden known for its giant spiders?) The next time he meets Clarel, he will...he will... Well, he hadn't quite decided what sort of reckoning he wished for her to face, too busy throwing dolls of straw made to her likeness into his camp fires.

"Have heart. I've been told that Warden Commander Amell is leading the Inquisition. She will set things straight again," Stroud had assured him one night, nursing a cup of tea for his headache, "I've known her for years. She is not the type of person to give up her search for us."

Carver had wondered how the Hero of Ferelden managed to control her Calling to effectively act as Inquisitor until one of his brother's letters arrived, hinting of a boon received from the Witch of the Wilds that granted her partial tolerance. Merrill used to tell him stories of Flemeth, "The elves never try to question her motives. Before my keeper's time, before my keeper's keeper's time, she wiped out an entire clan for their first's impudence."

The Hero of Ferelden was known among the organization for her wanderlust, establishing alliances with various groups of individuals, retrieving artifacts from ancient tombs, restocking hidden warden caches, rebuilding old fortresses, and recruiting ("If you want to join her, you have to impress her," the senior wardens had advised the newcomers.) There were many stories of her as a leader, less so of her as a person - at the very least, her opposition to Clarel meant that she did not buy into the other woman's rhetoric. His brother was apparently taken with her...which can honestly mean a lot of things. Carver hoped that cousin Amell shared Bethany's nice, caring, and good nature - Bethany was the only one in his family that he could get along with.

Maybe his cousin's fame wouldn't rub him in the same manner as his brother's reputation, consisting of less renown and more notoriety. Why must his relatives be so well known? Barring Uncle Gamlen, who was special in his own way, even cousin Charade had recently assumed the title as the head of the newly reinstated Amell family of Kirkwall. Sometimes, it seemed like everywhere he turned, every stranger he was introduced to, he was met with the question -

"Carver? Carver Hawke? Aren't you related to-"

"No."

He loved his family, but it was better if he loved them from a distance, with the occasional or not very occasional visit and letter. If he had not joined the grey wardens, he most likely would've turned to the Kirkwall templar order - having been impressed by the standard recruitment propaganda made by Knight Captain Cullen on protecting and guarding their mage charges. Regardless, he had to leave - he could not bear to witness the drama of how four of Hawke's Kirkwall friends following him around with different degrees of lovestruck and how his brother ignored the others' sometimes Lewd suggestions and pined after the oblivious dwarf which, after the first month, stopped being
funny and actually a little bit sad. At least these days, Merrill accepted the wild daisies that he found whenever he visited her at the alienage.

"Oh, how nice! They're so much like the Ferelden ones! They're even better than the ones I picked in the Hightown gardens."

"I'm glad you like- Wait, what?"

Of course, it was impossible to hide forever. With the number of wardens scattered through Crestwood like vermin, one was bound to catch sight of him. "The traitor is over there!" And today was just not his day. "Capture him! Warden Commander Clarel wants him alive!" Dropping his bundle of firewood, Carver let loose a string of choice words as he bolted away from the hilly meadow, leaping over what looked to be the rotting carcass of a dragon (Maker take whoever killed the Northern Hunter - he had been relying on its presence to deter the Orlesian wardens from venturing close to the territory), and behind an over crop of large boulders. Fully aware that the next few minutes would determine the outcome of the confrontation and whether or not this entire year living as a wanted man had all been in vain, he drew Seeker of the Grey from his back and prayed.

Thinking that he could establish a choke point, he retreated to the nearest cave entrance and struck the earth so hard that the ground shuddered, making quick work of his opponents when they stumbled and crashed into each other. Stroud emerged from one of the many tunnels of the network, drawn by the loud commotion generated by the tremor and rushed to guard his left flank. "You shouldn't be here," Carver said.

"And leave you to fall?" Stroud huffed as he used his sword to deflect a thrown dagger aimed to his shoulder. "I'm not that heartless."

"Surrender Warden Hawke!" A mage warden cried before Carver struck him with silence and then cleansed the area for good measure - one could never tell with those blasted entropy spells. The best mages didn't need a hair from their opponent to cast vulnerability, merely something that Carver had touched, a twig, leaf, or even the dirt he stepped on, would be enough for him to suddenly become encased in a death cloud's purple miasma.

Gritting his teeth, he scythed through the front lines only to find that more were storming in - how many people did Clarel send after them? Wardens should not be that expendable... The amount of effort was almost flattering if he wasn't so preoccupied with trying not to die. "It's Warden Carver!" He roared. Not Hawke, not his brother who had worn their family name so well that many people didn't know his actual given name. "You will call me Warden Carver!"

Suddenly, from his right side, a cluster of four reaver warriors that were all in the midst of blood frenzy were thrown to the floor with a powerful Fist of the Maker - and Carver knew of only one force mage who dared to cheekily modify the spell to have its victims dangle aloft for a microsecond longer than necessary before slamming them down. "Why brother!" an all too familiar and cheerful voice gushed behind him, "I didn't know you still cared so much!"

"Champion," Stroud greeted, unflinching as a fireball passed over his left shoulder, as the subsequent explosion knocked out an assassin from stealth. "Is the Inquisition with you?"

Hawke jerked his head back, "A few minutes away from that far hill."

"Good. Reinforcements are always appreciated. We're in a bit of a mess, as you can see." Carver snorted at Stroud's understatement: a bit of a mess? Of course- and the fade rifts found around Thedas are mildly inconvenient.
"Impeccable timing, brother," Carver duly noted. "As always."

"And still the same old Carver that I know and love," Hawke's riposte was relatively weak, most of his concentration focusing on the construction of a gravitic ring around them. "We're not done yet. That horn of theirs summoned every warden in Crestwood." At the sphere's epicenter, Carver and Hawke stood side by side as more yells echoed down the corridor, "The Hawke brothers against impossible odds," his brother reminisced, as lightning crackled from the sharp end of his bladed staff, "just like old times."

Deciding not to comment that even on his worst days in the Deep Roads, he much preferred fighting darkspawn then get embroidered into another one of his brother's crazy antics, Carver offered a non-committal grunt. Hawke tossed a health poultice his way. "Still can't cast the simplest healing spell?" Carver taunted as his bruises and cuts dissipated into his skin, leaping in the air for a mighty blow upon an enemy that was glowing with the cursed energies of a virulent walking bomb.

"Careful." Hawke dryly warned as he covered Stroud, who had assumed the chevalier defensive position of spear-fisher, in an arcane shield, "My next chain lightning might accidentally include you."

Carver turned to the side to spit out a mouthful of blood, "Its just an observation. I'm right, aren't I?"

"You're still a tit," his brother marveled as the dirt loosened at his feet to form a hefty sized boulder, as another wave of opponents flooded into cavern. "Incoming!" he called.

Assuming that his brother referred to the fresh line of enemies, Carver was not prepared for the invading group to suddenly freeze in their steps or for the cold blast of wind to scream past his ears. He blinked as ice began to creep up from their boots to their helmets, "I... What?" he blankly asked as he cautiously prodded at the icicles hanging off the sleeves of a nearby mage with his pommel.

"Stroud?" a voice called from behind the ice statues, "Senior Warden Stroud?" The petrified mage slowly tipped forward, revealing a woman of around his age, boot still held aloft in a mid-kick, slowly sheathing her sword that was still glowing from blessed blades. An all too familiar dwarf, a bearded warrior, and a seeker emerged from the cleared path behind her, "Fan out," she ordered, "I need them in custody before they thaw. Be mindful of the brittle ones."

Carver squinted at her: slim stature, heavy-duty armor and weapon, magic swirling around her like the tides of the Waking Sea - was she a mage or a warrior? His gaze shifted to her companions who were tying up the survivors of the blizzard. Hawke answered his unasked question, "You know Varric. The seeker is Cassandra Pentaghast, Hero of Orlais, nice woman once you get past that prickly exterior. The man... Well, I'm not too sure. Varric told me that he's pretending to be Warden Blackwall."

Warden Constable Blackwall? Oh... ...OK. Carver turned his attention back to the leader of the reinforcements who was deep in conversation with Stroud. Stroud saluted in response. "And her," he asked in a low tone, "That's the Hero of Ferelden? Our cousin?" Black hair and grey eyes was apparently an Amell trait - good to know.

"Second cousin," Hawke corrected happily.

Carver fought the urge to stand straight at attention in the presence of a Warden Commander when her gaze shifted toward him, taking special care to make it outwardly seem as if he was not affected by her titles. Though she slightly resembled a younger version of mother before her hair started to prematurely grey, she more or less was what he imagined his brother would look like if he had ever turned into a woman, though more slender. Casually flicking off bits of ice and blood from her mail,
she drew closer to until he could catch the words grumbled under her breath, "... go summon a
demon army! Yeah, great idea, Clarel! You're brilliant, Clarel! And now this? It must be a Tuesday.
Brainwashed wardens only on Thursdays after ritual dismemberment." She glanced up, "Ah," she
exclaimed, tilting her head to the side and grinning as Carver felt the blood drain from his face, "Well
met. I am Amell; you must be Carver."

Carver made the noise of a dying cat. That terrible humor. That smile. That tendency to be addressed
with their family name. That uncanny resemblance. That glint in her eyes that he knew to approach
with trepidation, present on only one other individual in all of Thedas. No, she was not Bethany. She
was far from Bethany. (And perhaps he had hoped so hard that she would share a likeness in
personality to anyone else but him that he did not even consider the possibility that...) "You alright
there, Junior?" Varric prodded his ribs with the butt of his crossbow.

Carver sank into a crouch, hiding his face behind his hands, moaning in despair, "Maker take me -
Why are there two of them?!

**Cullen**

It was very easy to distinguish the men and women claiming Ferelden roots from the others in
Skyhold. One simply had to observe how they interacted with Amell's mabari. Ten years of traveling
through the Free Marches did not in anyway make Carver Hawke less of a dog lover. "A mabari?"
He knelt down, patting his knee and extending a hand for the animal to sniff, "a pure mabari? You're
from good breeding stock, aren't you, boy?" After licking his open palm, Dog barked, happily
bounding into the man's open arms. It was a far cry from how he interacted with the other animals,
especially of those in the stables - though Varric would not stop teasing the warden about his earlier
encounter with the bog unicorn, everyone was sympathetic to his unfortunate incident with the
greater nuggalope. To be fair, no one, not even Horsemaster Dennet, anticipated the arrival of the
beast that was the greater nuggalope.

Cullen coughed into his glove as Carver fondly patted Dog's head one last time before watching him
trot off to the gardens. Compared to Senior Warden Stroud's debrief, Carver's was relatively short
and the two men had spent the remaining time catching up with the recent news of Kirkwall's
recovery from apostate Anders' terrorist attack and Prince Sebastian's failed siege upon the city.
Eventually, Cullen gave a cursory introduction to the Inquisition, taking the man through the
barracks, the tavern, the throne room, the atrium, and up the stairs to view the Frostback Mountains
from the battlements.

Carver raised an eyebrow at the scenery before his gaze shifted to the soldiers who were careful to
stay on their side of the wall. Cullen narrowed his eyes at the group that were trying their best to
seem inconspicuous - among them, hiding at the very back, he recognized the man who interrupted
his evening with Amell and who was partially responsible for his recent routine of cold showers in
the morning. "He stopped glaring at you since she returned," a whisper carried past the dull roar of
the wind and into his ears, "doesn't mean that he still won't try to kill you with training."

"So," Carver tested the word in a way that made Cullen dread the ensuing change in topic, "Is it
true? The rumors around Skyhold say that you've taken a lover."

"I'm pretty sure that's not all the rumors have told you," Cullen dryly answered. From what he could
parse out from the information traded, despite the teasing from the other advisors and members of her
Inner Circle, the rumors among the common people haven't exactly made the final leap from him
with a lover to him with the Inquisitor - he had thoroughly put the fear of the Maker in that particular
soldier's heart to prevent him from singing to anyone willing to listen. Still, speculation ran wild, to
the point that some believed that he was caught with his breeches down with his mysterious lover on
the throne (that story had Sera's fingerprints all over it.) The gossip mill was, despite his best efforts, stronger than ever - the sun had not even fully risen the next morning when Amell had prepared her party for the journey to Crestwood when the curious whispers around him started. Iron Bull had offered to buy him congratulatory drinks at Herald's Rest which he declined since nothing happened.

"With passion'd breath comes darkness, but with many against Her, She finds His light untiring as it parts the Veil," Carver intoned under his breath, his intentional butchering of the Chant to make it suggestive had Cullen's ears redden in embarrassment.

"Still a bit of a tit, aren't you?" Cullen groused as his hand crept up to his neck in an attempt to hide the flush that slowly rose to his face.

As if the Maker had personally maneuvered the timing of events to make sure that Cullen would feel the maximum amount of humiliation in regards to his love life, the door to his office opened: he sensed her magic before seeing her step out. "-personal hand in Thedas politics," Stoud said. Amell and Hawke matched his long strides as the senior warden's pronounced Orlesian lilt grew stronger in agitation, "It's because of your decisions that Sister Leliana is the favorite to be selected as the next Divine. Cassandra Pentaghast is rebuilding the Seekers under your guidance."

"She is the only one suited for the task," Amell argued, gesturing down at the training grounds where the woman was practicing with the Iron Bull, a crowd of admiring spectators surrounding them.

"Regardless, Warden Commander, be careful of your public opinion." Stroud pleaded with her, "The story of Sophia Dryden is not a mere tale of caution, it is actual history."

"I know. I talked with her - would not recommend." Amell replied evenly, as if meeting such a venerated woman who was thought to have died during the reign of King Arland in the storm age was a common event, "She was an unpleasant woman. It was impossible to tell where Sophia ended and the demon began." When Stroud pinched the bridge of his nose and heavily sighed, Amell threw her arms up in exasperation, "Look. I'm aware that the grey wardens claim political neutrality for a reason - but when people need me, do I just stand aside? Is that what you expect from me when everyone under the sun is asking for my help?"

"That is not a reason to meddle in -"

"I know what you mean," Hawke cut Stroud off, clucking his tongue in sympathy, "In Kirkwall, it was always 'Hawke this' and 'Hawke that.' From 'Hawke, defeat the Arishok and save your city' to 'Hawke, help Aveline find a way to woo Guardsman Donnic that does not include a bushel of wheat, a goat, or copper-plated marigolds.'" Carver slapped his palm over his eyes and groaned. "If I had a coin for every time I heard-" The man looked up in mid-conversation, eyes alighting upon them - and somehow, the way his entire countenance brightened sent an arrow of dread through Cullen's heart. "There they are!" He announced.

Amell peered around Hawke's shoulder, "Warden Carver," her lips twisted in amusement when Carver straightened so quickly that his shin guards made an audible click as they snapped together,
"Commander Cullen." Cullen smiled back, almost reaching out to tuck a wayward strand of hair behind her ear, aborting the motion, and instead offering an awkward salute. "We were looking for you."

Looking for him? "Inquisitor?"

Stroud stepped forward and cleared his throat, "There's an ancient Tevinter ritual tower on the Western Approach. We," he indicated himself and Carver, "believe that the Orlesian wardens are gathering there to summon demons because the veil is thin in the area. We don't know if word of our arrival at Skyhold has reached Clarel yet."

"We'll need to move fast. Time is not on our side," Amell continued as she handed him a small dossier. He could tell that she also felt the small spark of frisson when their fingers brushed together with the way that her hand flexed after she pulled back.

"Do I need to send more troops with you when you leave tomorrow?" he inquired, brow furrowing as he scanned the supplies and projected numbers needed for a regiment.

She hummed in thought, "Not yet. But when we return, we'll need to mobilize an army as soon as possible. The ritual tower won't be their stronghold." As he tucked away the vellum into his armor, she glanced between him and Carver, "Details still need to be ironed out. Will you be joining us in the war room?"

Rolling his shoulders back, Cullen turned to motion towards Carver, "I still need to show him to his quarters but we'll..." he trailed off when he was met with a baleful glare from the younger Hawke brother.

"I take back everything I just said," Carver's nose wrinkled as his gaze swiveled from him toward his cousin. Cullen faltered - was his expression that obvious? Or was it easier to make the revelation because of Hawke's not so subtle hints?

"I knew you found out the moment I saw you," Hawke said smugly, giving a hard slap against his brother's back that had the younger man stumbling forward, "You had that look on your face. And it only took a day - Varric owes me ten sovereigns." Cullen gazed heavenward: of course the Champion and the dwarf would make a bet on something as inane as this.

"I hate you so much." Carver muttered.

"No you don't. You love me." Buffing his hails against his furs, Hawke paused before shooting a wink at Cullen, "Though not that way." Hawke then took a step back upon seeing the glower Cullen directed at him which told him that the ex-templar was one word away from 'accidentally' smiting him on the spot.

Amell blinked, "I'm sorry? Am I missing something here?"

Thank the Maker that she never outgrew her characteristic obliviousness. He could still recall all the times he slipped and stuttered around her in Kinloch Hold, garnering strange looks from both fellow templars and mages, even First Enchanter Irving and Knight Commander Greagoir had privately talked with him about the policy of fraternization between the two groups, and yet she never realized.

"Not another word from you two," Cullen hissed at the brothers, hand latching onto the back of Carver's collar and yanking him back. As he smiled at Amell, he promised, "We'll be there shortly."

Still unsure of how to interpret the scene before her, she offered a vague wave of dismissal as she followed Stroud to the north tower that led to the tavern. "As you were."
"My cousin? My commander? According to the Orlesian nobles in the throne room, she's just about had some affair with everyone notable in the Inquisition," Carver mumbled as Cullen dragged him away.

"Oh?" Cullen frowned as he pushed the door to his office open with more force than necessary.

"Lady Josephine, Sister Leliana, the Iron Bull, the fake Blackwall..." Carver listed off as Hawke offered a jaunty two-finger salute over a shoulder before joining the ongoing debate between Amell and Stroud about the advantages and disadvantages of having wardens interfere with non-darkspawn related matters of the world. "But with you: that is real?" Watching the three disappear out of sight, Cullen ran a hand through his hair as a series of expressions, too fast to be deciphered, flickered across Carver's face, "This will take some time to get used to." He finally decided, reemerging from his childish sulk, "Congratulations are in order, I suppose."

Well. At least he now has approval from both the Hawke brothers, which is about the closest he was ever going to receive as blessings seeing that her siblings, as she had told him, were most likely... Cullen shook his head. "Let us go." Cullen headed back to his office, deciding to take the path through the circular tower to reach the guest rooms, "And do try to be on your best behavior when we reconvene."

"Don't worry, Commander," Carver drawled, sounding almost like his brother in the amount of lip in his words, "You won't expect any objections from me."

**Hawke**

"We're too late." Amell's voice resembled that of a Tranquil, calm and flat despite the horrific scene laid out before her: endless rows of ritual circles where mages, each with a serrated dagger in hand, stood over the bodies of non-mages. Blood dripped from the knife edge and dissipated into the air before hitting the floor, thickening the already present red haze that hung at eye level. It smelled of copper. Hawke surreptitiously double-checked his grip on her arm: she trembled under his hand, his hold being the only thing preventing her from charging recklessly into the assembly, her magic manifesting as a thick miasma crackling around her, the roar of the sea in his ears and the smell of salt water in his mouth.

"How nice of you to join us," a distant silhouette called out, stepping onto the dais, "Inquisitor... Warden-Commander. I welcome you and your company to our gathering."

The sigils on his arm itched lightly as if someone had lightly raked their nails down his skin: no pain, just a stinging sensation that he hadn't felt for over a year. "Blood magic."

"Maferath's balls," Varric cursed from the rear as he slid a bolt into his crossbow, "Again?" His answer was the sound of swords being drawn, of clinking armor as Blackwall, Carver, and Stroud assumed ready position. "Kid, remember what I told you: out of sight." Cole shuffled back and tried to hide behind Varric's shorter form.

Amell noted the man's lack of silver armor and griffon helmet, "I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, mage..." the emblazoned insignia of dual serpents of differing size flashed against the light of the braziers as he approached, "Tevinter... Venatori?"

"How astute of you. Did Clarel fail to mention me in her letters?" As the Venatori mage asked, demons began to rise from their respective sacrifice: wraiths, shades, fearlings... despair, rage, terror... "I am Magister Livius Erimond, sent here by my master to bring the Imperium back to its age of glory."
"Corypheus," she hissed as she scanned the mages who, in inhuman synchronicity, turned in their direction. "But why would they..." Hunched postures and unfeeling eyes - were they alive? Dead? Stuck in an inbetween? "Warden Kell?" She called out to a motionless man in the second to last row. At the lack of response, she canted her head to the side and frowned, "Warden Alayne?" she tried again at a short haired woman who blankly stared ahead a few meters from Hawke's left and was again met with silence.

"Oh dear. Are some of these people yours, Warden-Commander?" Magister Erimond flicked a wrist - the mages slowly advanced with their leashed demons in tow. "I'm afraid they won't listen to you, too grateful that I had given them the solution to prevent the extinction of your order. They will answer only to me."

"Mind control." Stroud deduced.

"No Litany of Adralla to help me now," Amell humorlessly added.

Blackwall took a cautious step toward the advancing army, "what are your orders?"

"Fight defensively," she decided after a beat, "taunt them and hold the line." Her right hand began to flex as the temperature around them began to plummet, "Hawke, give me a gravitic ring on my mark." Simple enough - he can create them in his sleep, having once woken up to one in his bedroom in nights when he had still bunked with Carver in Lowtown. It had taken six minutes for Carver to finish cursing him to the fade and back before Uncle Gamlen finally stumbled in, pissed from both a night of spirits and a lack of sleep, and forced Hawke to release the spell. "Cole," the barely discernible outline on Varric's left leaned forward, "that man is Tevinter, the bad kind, not like Dorian. Do not, under any circumstance-"

"Demons can safely cross the Veil. If he controls the fabric, he'll control both realms. He'll become a living god." Just as Erimond finished his monologue, Cole's wavering voice, oddly loud, pierced the din of restless demons and the ambient buzzing in his ears.

"-draw his attention..." with a resounding slap, Amell's palm hit her face.

Erimond squinted down at the boy, "Correct, lad," puzzlement and suspicion creeping into his tone, "You took the words right out of my head. The exact words..."

"Sorry," Cole muttered.

"I know what you are." Magister Erimond snapped his fingers, green tendrils weaved through the air, arching over the mass of mages and demons, descending upon the party, "I've seen fade creatures such as yourself in the Imperium, but not one so uncorrupted." Cole shrank down, ducking his head to hide his face beneath the wide brim of his hat, "Your kind does not last long in this world. You will make an interesting study, regardless, spirit or demon." Amell stepped in front of his mana surge and countered his attack with manipulated fade aura emanating from her anchor. Erimond snarled as he yanked his arm back, "You dare! That power does not belong to you!"

"Now, Hawke!"

A blue dome of physical energy materialized in the center of the platform, grinding the wardens' and their demons' movements to a slow crawl. As Blackwall bellowed a war cry, the Inquisition burst into motion. Hawke's world narrowed to his immediate surroundings as he concentrated on throwing spell after spell: a cone of cold at a rage demon, fist of the maker at a cluster of shades, a rain of fire upon the hovering despair demon, a telekinetic burst whenever anyone came too close. Suffocating mana auras infused the battlefield, prolonging his cooldown period between spells - though the area
effect did not seem to affect Amell, who, as he saw in his periphery, unleashed wave after wave of fire and ice as she gave chase.

"I'm sorry that Corypheus's plans tend to go awry. His own god betrayed and abandoned him. What hope do you have following such a master?" There was a quality of vindictive glee in her taunts, "Why are you so upset? Isn't that how it's always been?" the air, for lack of a better word, snapped: he felt his hairs on his nape stand on end. He heard Erimond shout in alarm, "I recall a story of a magister walking into the Golden City and becoming the world's first darkspawn. What do they tell you in Tevinter?"

A dying screech of a fearling left behind an eerie calm. A rage demon sank back into its summoning circle, droplets of molten lava that bordered the pooling blood crackled and popped. - In less than ten minutes, the fight was over. Hawke slowly exhaled.

Blackwall picked up a griffon helmet that had rolled onto the walkway and silently examined it. Stroud gathered pendants (Warden's Oath - Carver had once showed it to Merrill in an attempt to impress her) from the litter of corpses. Hawke prodded the body of the last mage he killed with his boot (she clawed at the walls of the crushing prison, sputum dribbling out of her mouth). Varric nudged his side, a silent query of his health - Hawke squeezed his shoulder in response. Massive gouges along the walls and floors hinted at the liberal use of stone fists. A twister of fire burned merrily over the litter of bodies. At the base of the watchtower, Amell and Carver conversed in low voices.

With a wary eye on the inferno and a hand still on his polearm, Hawke approached the pair and cleared his throat, "Where is the magister?"

"Gone," she ran a hand through her hair, tugging at the ends, "I almost had him but he fade-stepped out of sight. Fortunately, he didn't cover his tracks." She showed him a folded piece of old parchment, "I found this. See?" She triumphantly shook the vellum at his face until he grew cross-eyed, "Adamant."

He blinked. ...Adamant? "Its an abandoned Grey Warden fortress not too far from here. It must be their new headquarters," Carver explained when he saw Hawke's perplexity, wiping the sweat from his brow and sheathing his sword back into its scabbard, "Stroud and I will go scout ahead to make sure he's there."

"Locate as many doors as you can and note the size and the length of their passage way. We will regroup at Nazaire's Pass. We won't leave for Skyhold without you." Amell shook her head, "Blood magic and demon armies - Cullen is going to love this." It's a bit ridiculous how much his life had been defined by those two aspects and he had once wondered if they were things that all mages experienced on a weekly basis - like how every Kirkwaller, from Darktown to Hightown, had to step into The Blooming Rose at least once in their lives. He had asked his cousin of her background but quickly concluded that if he wanted an answer from a 'normal' mage (whatever defined the term 'normal' these days), it was best not to question someone who thought that single-handedly felling an ogre was synonymous to a coming of age ritual. A cough pulled him out of his musings. He glanced up; Carver stared at him, every bit of his body language screaming his apprehension. Hawke tilted his head in silent askance.

"You would never do this." Hawke blinked - how horrific he must look in his moments of pensiveness for his brother to decide that now would be an ideal time to dole out his rare bouts of compassion. You would never do this. Carver's confidence in him was flattering but Hawke knew, despite majority opinion, that he was far from infallible.

"You're wrong. That power was a siren's song. I could have easily delved deeper into its well of
potential like everyone else. I almost did."

Carver frowned, "You had self-control. You stopped on your own," he insisted. When stubborn set in his jaw did not disappear, Carver sighed and threw up his hands in defeat, muttering, "See if I ever try to comfort you again." Hawke blew at his bangs as his brother, moody once more, stomped off to the parapets. How sweet. I would give you a piece of candy for your effort if I had any in my pockets. Amell's eyes flickered to Carver's retreating form before landing back on Hawke.

As he traced the outline of faded scares in his palm with a gauntlet covered finger, he thought about the what-ifs. What if he hadn't stopped his studies into the specialization as temptations to take a little more than needed continued to rise? Maleficarum. He could still feel the incredible power (it tasted like copper) coursing through his veins with every Hemorrhage that was cast. Would he be trying to justify instead of condemn the Grey Wardens' actions? "Many people thought that these were harmless warpaint," he gestured at the blood sigils on his upper arm. "Family members are immune to glamour spells. Carver argued against studying the discipline up until about the fourth time I used it to save his life. But then..." Mother died. Keeper Marethari died trying to save Merrill from her foolishness. His brother was kidnapped and nearly died. First Enchanter Orsino fell prey to its allure. "There were days when you could walk through the Gallows, randomly point at five mages wandering about, and chances were that at least three of them have tried their hand at it in some way or another."

Varric chatted with Carver by the footbridge; judging by the latter's face, Varric was most likely telling a story that was believable only after a couple of strong pints. Blackwall and Stroud gathered the bodies together for a pyre. "Blood magic was always a curiosity among the apprentices." Amell started after a few seconds of contemplative silence, "I... It never crossed my mind to dabble. I was too caught up with my own studies." She gestured towards the sword strapped on her back, referencing her strange fighting style that combined fleet-footedness, elemental magic, and sword art: drawing influences from both Arcane Warriors and Knight Enchanters, an interest that had apparently developed during her youth when no senior mages knew how to teach that method of combat. "What little appeal blood magic had over me died when my best friend betrayed me and Senior Enchanter Uldred all but gutted the Ferelden Circle."

Hawke winced, "Sorry. Sore point for you?"

"Jowan tried to redeem himself by saving a village from darkspawn. But he was tainted and I had no blood of an archdemon." Cole whispered from Hawke's shoulder. "But Uldred? My first home - gone - lost to a madman's ambitions. His actions were unforgivable. Uldred burned slowly-"

"Cole." Amell interrupted sharply, a hand pressing against her forehead. Cole's jaw clicked shut. "It's impolite to... Nevermind." She shook out her hands. "It's been ten years." she muttered as she spun on her heel and approached the makeshift vigil as Stroud waited for her to give last rites, "Jowan and Uldred are behind me. I'm fine."

"I'm not fine." Cole's faint voice dispersed into the desert air. Hawke wondered if she heard.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

**HERE LIES THE ABYSS.** the well of all souls.
From these emerald waters doth life begin anew.
Come to me, child, and I shall embrace you.
In my arms lies Eternity.

-Andraste 14:11

Amell

For the past hour, Cassandra hasn't moved from her seat on the tree stump, weapons laid abandoned by her side, engrossed in the manuscript of the most recent chapter of *Swords and Shields*. "The beginning of a beautiful friendship starts with smut literature and ends with frolicking together in the meadows, hand in hand," Hawke adopted a scholarly tone as he narrated. Amell hummed in agreement at his side, head tilted toward the midday sun, basking in its fleeting heat as a scattering of clouds passed overhead.

Varric stuffed his hands into the pockets of his duster, uncomfortable by the teasing, "Can it, Hawke," and got an eyeroll in response.

"Don't be so dour. She thanked you. Wait till she finds out that there are no other copies and that you wrote it specifically for her."

"That's because the series doesn't sell well enough to make a profit. My publisher balked at..." Varric's excuses faltered when he received flat stares from his audience and the ambient chirping of nearby warblers. "Ok, fine. I wrote it because I was trying to be friendly. But it wasn't just for her - you two also read the series and enjoy its..." Varric marked the last word with finger quotations, "smut." Apparently that word bothered him - he used to claim that all of his racy scenes were of the fluff variety but he's been arguing less these days when Hawke had taken to read passages out loud in the throne room with a gathering of enthralled and scandalized Orlesian nobles.

Hawke sheepishly scratched his beard, "Ah, true. I just finished the last chapter. Cassandra promised to lend me that book when she's done."

Amell made a noncommittal noise, "Like I said before, *Swords and Shields* is not my idea of leisure reading. I skimmed the first chapter and got a summary of the rest." She shrugged, "The transitions flowed well between character perspectives. It's good in a technical sense." Varric preened, "I've read many worse things."

Her last comment invited curious looks. "Alright," Varric snapped his fingers, "I'll bite: what is the worst thing you've ever read, Inquisitor?"

Amell clicked her tongue. "...Anders' manifesto comes to mind."

Hawke blinked, "You also read Anders' manifesto?"
"Read it? He asked me to edit it." After exchanging a wordless glance, the two friends consolingly patted her on the shoulder... *expounding on the freedom of the mages, the downtrodden, those whose gifts defy the others' judgments hereafter the Chantry did act with jealousy. With Justice at my side, I ask my fellows to rise up against the tyranny and fight chain and shackles to gain acceptance within the commons understanding not of their ignorance...* She had marked the draft so thoroughly that it bled and dripped red.

"Really?" Anders grimaced as he held up the vellum delicately between two fingers.

"At least your spelling is passable." Amell raised an eyebrow, tapping her pen against her inkwell, "Where were you when we took grammatical lessons in the Circle?"

"Outside," he retorted as he gingerly folded the parchment. When he straightened, Justice peered through his face: dual lights of blinding white extending into the veins surrounding his eyes, "thank you," he spun on his heels and left her office. A few days later, she received word that he had left Amaranthine and made the fateful decision of not sending anyone out to search his trail... though Warden Constable Howe did bring some interesting reports from his travels through the Deep Roads that ran underneath Kirkwall years later.

Anders and Justice... Hawke and Varric took the path to Herald's Rest, intending to have their luncheon with the Iron Bull and his mercenary company. Continuing on her own through a series of winding corridors, Amell stopped just before the double doors of the war room and stared out of a gap in the wall that never managed to get fixed. The eastern wind blew past the Frostback Mountains, bringing with it the scent of embrium from the Hinterlands. *Wardens and demons...* Amell closed her eyes and took a deep breath, pushing out her anger with a shuddering exhale. There is a sizable dent across Nazaire's Pass in the Western Approach from when she had lashed out as the implications of her discovery finally set in: *her own wardens willingly participated in sacrificial blood magic to summon demons. She trained them; she mentored them. A third of them willingly left her ranks. Why did they leave? She had promised them that she would find a solution. She promised that she would protect them. Why did they doubt her?*

The advisors were already stationed at their respective corners of the mission table when she knocked and entered. As Leliana gestured at a nearby plate of toasted sandwiches, Josephine handed her a long list of nobles that had recently pledged their retainers to their cause. After Amell thanked the Ambassador for her work, Cullen approached with the final blueprints of Adamant Fortress, pieced together with the reports from Stroud and Carver, directing her attention to the various marked strategic positions: choke points and weakened structural areas within the dark jetstone walls that his soldiers could exploit. "I only need about three people with me to take the main grounds. The rest of the Inner Circle can be sent to the baileys to subdue the archers," she suggested as she fiddled with the sandwich in her hand, forcing herself to take a few bites when the disappointment in Leliana's stare reached new heights.

"If I'll lower the overall projected body count if they can get up there quickly enough," Cullen scribbled a note in the margins of the recent maintenance reports on his battering rams. "Despite our large force, we will have the element of surprise. Don't be afraid to take advantage of it." He paused in his calculations of supplies needed per soldier and started shuffling through endless diagrams of siege engines, pulling out ones he believed were battle-ready, "All of your companions will be joining us?"

"Well, that was the idea until this morning's assassination attempt. Do you think we'll be leaving Skyhold vulnerable?" chewing on her lower lip, Amell leaned over his shoulder and canted her head as she attempted to read the tiny handwriting on the schematics, "I mean, the Reposes will definitely
try again. Maybe we should take Josephine with us." Cullen coughed into his hand. Amell could understand why: the image of the Ambassador trekking through the desert under the unforgiving sun decked in her usual heavy yellow and purple silks was nothing short of ridiculous.

"You shouldn't worry, Inquisitor." Josephine scrunched her nose in distaste, "I prefer cooler climates, preferably areas close to civilization. Additionally, if you would recall, the assassin was thwarted before he even reached the doors to my office."

"The assassin was trampled by a nuggalope." Amell corrected her. The nuggalope in question, brought in earlier that day, had been rewarded with fattened crickets, fresh deep mushrooms, and a saddle made from the finest Antivan leather.

"But Inquisitor," Horsemaster Dennet protested, wringing his hands as he stared up at the Gwaren Land-Hammer that proudly tossed its head as Cullen and his soldiers struggled to drag the animal through the front gates, "Merciful Andraste. Do we really need more nuggalopes?" His grievance went in one ear and out the other.

"Where do you think they come from? Did nugs at one point breed with horses? Can you imagine ..?" Amell mused fondly, patting the left flank after measuring its height: almost twenty-two hands, "You are as hideous and marvelous as the last one." She ought to ask Josephine to send a thank-you letter to Deraboam in Val Royeaux.

"It handles things." That particular phrase coupled with that particular look of despair on his weather-beaten face would be repeated over and over again in the coming months. The animal snorted as it pawed the ground, five fingers digging into the top soil, pulling out handfuls of grass at a time. The man pulled at the ends of his beard and retreated to the stables, "Back in my day, dracolisks and harts were considered to be the pinnacle of exotic mounts. Not this... thing. What the ever-loving spit?"

Amell sighed happily as Cullen handed her the reigns with a carefully blank expression and excused himself to check on Horsemaster Dennet's declining sanity. "So worth it."

"This wouldn't have happened if you had just allowed me to send my spies to destroy the contract on you." Leliana tutted as she leafed through dictated personal accounts from people who claimed to have worked alongside Clarel, making the occasional notation whenever she found anything interesting (ie. blackmail worthy).

"Thank you for giving me agency on how I decide to solve my own problems," Josephine sipped from her tea cup and took a delicate bite from a small vanilla biscotti.

"Josie," Leliana drawled out, mouth twisting into a pout. "are you still upset that Michel de Chevin was assigned under my command? I bet Lord Pel Harmond can easily replaced whatever role you had in mind for him." The Antivan slowly placed her cup back onto its saucer, the sound of china clinking against china echoed dully in the room. "Not many people claim first hand experience traversing the eluvians. Some insight into Briala's eventual schemes would be beneficial to the Inquisition's future."

"If I may get us back on track," tapping a metal piece signifying an army contingent on the world map over the Abyssal Reach, Cullen interjected, "I can easily spare a guard or two to stand at Josephine's door while the rest of us depart to Adamant Fortress."

Running her nails against the grain of the table, Leliana considered the offer, "That is acceptable." She finally decided. Josephine similarly agreed to the decision with a gracious smile. "The Reposes are not that threatening. However, I would like it if the patrols would continue even after the warden
problem is resolved - the renewed attempts on our ambassador's life will not stop when we return. Goodness, Marquis Wiscotte's fete isn't for another three weeks. Is there anything else we can do to expedite the Du Paraquettes' rise to gentry? Will the marquis be amendable to a personal visit by the Inquisitor? Maybe Amell can convince him to push the date forward and -"

"Unless you manage to somehow insert into my already frightening schedule a slight detour to Wiscotte's mansion between my journey back from the Western Approach to Skyhold, that would not be possible," Amell dryly rebuffed the idea, "I'm afraid I can only jump through one hoop at a time."

"Well, it was a thought," Leliana sighed as she dipped her pen in the inkwell, "There's still the issue of how to convince Minister Bellise into ratifying the Du Paraquette's return to nobility." She pointed out, "We'll need to offer something in exchange - maybe Minister Bellise will seek one of our services," her eyes took on a mischievous slant, "Or, Amell, you can try to offer yourself. She has a penchant for people in positions of power..." Cullen's hands slowly closed into fists. "I was joking, Commander." His dark look did not disappear.

"Be nice," Josephine peered over her clipboard and chastened. "As a candidate for the Divine, it is imperative that you present your best self to the Grand Clerics - that includes your reputation. We know that you take too much pleasure vexing our beloved Commander here. We don't need the entire Chantry to know too."

Amell reached for Cullen's hand, intertwining their fingers, and squeezing softly, "Don't worry," she attempted to soothe, "I'm pretty bad at seducing people." Leliana made a small noise at the back of her throat and leaned back, staring determinedly at the vaulted ceiling as her lips twitched. "Bann Teagan doesn't count, Leliana."

"Not helping, Amell." Cullen groaned as he buried his face into his hands.

**Carver**

The warden horns have been sounding the alarm since the first siege rams had slammed against the gates. A piercing wail that was said to mimic the cries of griffons emanated from within the walls and did not stop even as Inquisition soldiers poured into the lower bailey. The Inquisition's Inner Circle had split in half with Varric, Solas the apostate elf, and Iron Bull the qunari mercenary accompanying Amell to the center while the rest followed Cullen to the battlements. "Clarel de Chanson should be with the main body," Stroud yelled over the war cries and ringing of metal clash against metal, "Stick with Warden-Commander Amell and watch her closely. The Calling has placed her under a lot of strain." Carver scratched his cheek, recalling a conversation he had overheard the night before when he had passed by a tent in his search for a midnight snack.

"- worse than before."

"It looks worse than it actually is. I can still fight."

"You said those exact words in Haven and-"

"Cullen. I won't die. I promise. Though I specialize in killing darkspawn, I'm no stranger to warden fighting techniques."

The difference between fighting a darkspawn and fighting a warden is that the former risked more for less, recklessly tearing its way into battle, knowing that their numbers bolstered their lacking abilities. On the other hand, these wardens were fully aware of how the Calling had diminished their lot to near extinction and... Well... It wasn't as if he could suddenly wipe away all the fond memories
of his time with these people: he broke bread with them and traded ribald jokes over the fires. It
wasn't just the Grey Warden order, it was a second family. And now... The mages did not recognize
him under the thrall and the non-mages that had their rituals interrupted were trying to skewer him.
How quickly things can change. It was a sobering thought.

What do you feel when your family betrays you? The troubled look on Stroud's face openly mirrored
his inner turmoil. His cousin's eyes narrowed in fury with every Ferelden warden (wearing
considerably muter shades than their Orlesian counterparts and helmets unadorned with ostentatious
silver wings) they came across. Since their departure from the Ritual Tower, she had been a veritable
force of nature, a barely controlled hurricane of fire and ice compressed into a slip of a body - a
barrel of qunari blackpowder within range of an open fire. Her rage, at its peak, is silent - of the
people here, only his brother was brave enough to speak to her without fear.

"I'm surprised you didn't kill them," Hawke commented, alluding to the group of wardens that was
granted clemency after the Inquisition had saved them from a two-sided assault from fellow spell-
bounded wardens and demons.

She shrugged his hand off her shoulder, heading to the stairs leading to the main bailey, dodging the
flying debris that resulted from a pride demon's whip attack. "My advisors and I discussed the
possibilities of prisoners. I acknowledge, with great difficulty, that they are more useful alive than
dead."

"Warden-Commander Amell!" A warden duelist stepped forward from the group still
remaining from the skirmish and saluted. The warriors behind her hesitantly mirrored
her actions, "Thank you, we-" She faltered as Amell turned sharply from her brief
survey of the carnage resulting from the infighting, swallowing heavily when his
cousin's greatsword swung around, tip hovering just inches from her carotid artery,
"we," she licked her lips and tried again, "are the only ones remaining who refused to be
sacrificed in the blood magic ritual. Please spare us."

"A bit late for that, wouldn't you say?" Amell replied scathingly, the point of her blade
now resting lightly on the exposed skin between the duelist's mail shirt and the helmet.

"Please, Warden-Commander," the other woman choked out, wincing as a small trickle
of blood started a path down to her shirt, "We ask to parley."

In the distance, the screams of humans and fade creatures meshed into a high pitch
cacophony that had hairs standing on end. The warden duelist cringed. "You have a lot
to answer for." Amell surmised levelly as she stepped back and lowered her sword,
"Your presence here tells me that you didn't change your mind when the rituals started,
you changed your mind when it was your turn to be sacrificed." The rogue warden
bowed her head, silent in the accusations, a hand pressing against her neck to staunch
the bleeding. "Head to the barbican, throw down your weapons, and do not engage
anyone. Tell Inquisition Commander Cullen that I sent you and await further orders."
With one final bow of deference that embodied a curious dichotomy of fear,
desperation, and gratitude, the remaining wardens departed.

"I didn't expect this many mages," Iron Bull grunted as he cleaved through another spellbinder,
shaking the blood (mainly his own - Carver had gotten an impromptu lecture from the qunari at the
Skyhold tavern about how reavers had to meticulously time their regeneration potion intake in order
to maximize the amount of damage output in relation to perceived pain - a surprisingly complicated
mathematical equation considering the bard tales that described a reaver's mindless fury in battle) off
his body like a mabari emerging from the water, "Par Vollen usually gets one Saarebas per hundred
"Clarel's troops average one mage out of ten," Stroud informed him as he braced his shield against an incoming ice spike from a despair demon, "Many mages, I am informed, are attracted to the idea of freely wandering Thedas and considered the duties of a warden as a fair price. Knowing Clarel, she would have started actively recruiting from the Circles when the Calling started, especially during the chaos offered by the war. Fortunately, the results of her conscription choices has hindered the strength of the order. It was one of the reasons why Carver and I escaped her initial wrath. No matter how powerful a mage you are, anyone with templar skills, whose training regimen revolves around enduring and denying magic, is an opponent not to be underestimated."

"A specialization I can see useful in a post-war world filled with apostates," Solas remarked in a light tone as he manipulated his magic essence into a fist, hammering down upon a cluster of shades that were rushing to their position.

"People say that." Carver shook his head, "Still, give me darkspawn over this any day of the week. I'll even accept a hoard of alphas and emissaries." Compared to mage wardens, emissaries were absurdly easy to deal with, sharing with their non-magical brethren the lack of group tactics. As for demons... They are more straightforward than mages - demons without hosts are more animal than human and Carver had just spent an entire year on the run with nothing but black wolves and hungry bears for company.

The conversation ground to a halt when the Inquisition ducked under the half-raised portcullis and entered the main ward where they found Magister Erimond and Clarel de Chanson, heads bent together; a warden with arms clasped behind his back and head bent down was kneeling at their feet - blood pouring out of his neck and vaporizing into the air. His brother gave an impressed whistle, "That is the biggest summoning circle I've ever seen," he observed in a low tone as the party drew closer until the standing pair noticed their presence. Erimond sneered as Clarel drew her staff, cupping a hand over the softly glowing focus gem and illuminated their position in the darkness.

"Amell?" Her voice pierced through the sounds of battle that still continued along the upper walls and the corridors leading into the keep. The wardens that had congregated along the far walls to watch the ritual proceedings shifted uneasily but did not draw their arms. Clarel straightened to her full height, her bearing proud and unyielding, her airs demanding attention and respect without crossing the thin border into arrogance. (Was the effortless charisma a prerequisite for Warden-Commanders or does that skill develop out of necessity?) At one point in Carver's life, he had been proud to serve under her. Had. "What are you doing here?"

("Bigger circle means bigger demon?" Varric whispered.

"Its an exponential relationship, I'm afraid," squinting, his brother took a moment to gauge its size, "if they are successful, we can expect something the size of this fortress.")

Amell crossed her arms and scoffed, angling her body in a way that excluded the magister from the conversation, "That question is too generic. What is I doing here besides the complete obvious?" Clarel narrowed her eyes but did not move. Underneath the hostility between the two mages, there was an tenuous base of respect to the warden rank and title - which probably was the only reason why no spells has yet to be flung. "You seem less insane than what your letters implied. Let's speak cordially." The tension in the air had hackles raised and fingers twitching over sword grips - mana infused the area like a low hanging fog; Carver's instincts born from templar training screamed at him to silence the area. "That means putting away the weapon, Clarel."

"Warden-Commander Clarel," Erimond exclaimed incredulously, "are you going to let this... This..." after momentarily struggling to find an insult that would offend one but not the other, he settled upon
- "traitor," he pointed down at Amell who gave a wane smile and a two fingered salute, "talk to you in this manner? She is trying to stop our plans. We have spent months preparing for this moment!"

A scathing glare quelled his protests to silent bristling, no more harmless than a cat. "Quiet, Magister." Clarel's Orlesian lilt strengthens when agitated and right now, she was being pulled in the four cardinal directions of the wind. Suspicion outlined her responses that were not only directed toward Amell but also toward Erimond - does she already assume foul play? Most likely not, not entirely at least: the man would be nothing but a smear on the ground if she knew the extent of his trickery. "You," Amell blinked as Clarel rounded on her, tone brimming with vitriol and hurt, "turned down my offer of partnership and joined the Inquisition, the very Inquisition that is attacking my gates and interfering with my efforts against future Blights. You are a fellow warden, a fellow Warden-Commander, and I know you understand our order's sole purpose. Why are you trying to stop me?"

"Trying to stop you?" His cousin echoed with a faint note of disbelief that is quickly masked by mocking amusement, "I am not trying. I am here," she stated, words spoken with deliberate slowness, "to stop you from making terrible life decisions. Though I really have to hand it to you," she turned to address Erimond who was grinding his teeth in frustration, "you either lucked out on picking someone exceptionally gullible or your persuasion skills are unparallel."

"Cease the impertinent tone. Your accusations are absurd, Inquisitor," Erimond snarled, slicing the air before him with a hand. "You have no proof." The Orlesian wardens murmured among themselves.

"Your membership in a Tevinter supremacy cult that is not recognized in any way by their own government should be enough to raise questions about your integrity." Amell flicked her wrist - the anchor sputtered, tinting their immediate surroundings a sickening green, "We have papers and eye-witness accounts linking your sect to a darkspawn magister who is responsible for the Breach and multiple fade rifts scattered throughout two countries, a darkspawn magister that is somehow manufacturing the false Calling. Tell me, Venatori, is the evidence not sufficient enough for you?"

(A faint buzzing began to itch between his temples. Darkspawn? Here? Granted there were reports of troops patrolling the areas northeast of Griffon Wing Keep but his senses, diminished by the Calling, hinted of a singular corruption. An Archdemon? No. There were no other signs that precludes a Blight. Something larger than the average lieutenant... The high-pitch whine grew stronger. No one else, not Stroud, not his cousin, not Clarel, no other warden, seemed to be aware. Carver shook his head and prodded Stroud's shoulder, angling his head toward the direction of the north watchtower.)

"Magister Erimond, do you hold allegiances to a darkspawn?" Clarel demanded as the main battle between the Orlesian wardens and the Inquisition slowly moved from the battlements to the main bailey as ancient stone defenses began to crumble. "When I had expressed my concerns over the behaviors of my mages who had undergone the binding-")

Erimond adamantly shook his head, "Your wardens are alive! There are behavioral side-effects from the magical residue that will disappear in time. I have explained all of this to you and I have little patience to do so again." The stricken tension in Clarel's body language did not leave. "I have served you faithfully, Warden-Commander. I have solved your problems. She is trying to stall us. Everything out of her mouth is hearsay and conjecture." A rift, larger than any that he had ever spotted in Crestwood,

("Red lyrium nearby, fast approaching" Varric muttered, rubbing an ear. His brother's head snapped up in alarm. "Where is it coming from? Do you think Haven...")
"Are you kidding me?! You cannot be this blind. Your mages are not your mages - they are dead inside," Amell sounded ready to tear out chunks of her hair in exasperation. "Do you still think that Erimond has a point? You can't even see the line between right and wrong because you merrily stomped it to pieces! You are building a demon army. That mere sentence should sound reprehensible." She wildly gestured at the magister, "Why are you trusting him and not me? What more do I need to prove his duplicity?"

And that was when a dragon, corruption emanating from its large body, red lyrium crystals growths peaking out among scales, plunged down to the main courtyard, shaking the very foundations of Adamant Fortress, and roared.

**Varric**

*I, Varric dimly thought as the walkway beneath his boots began to fracture, breath escaping him as he and his companions plummeted past the ledge and pieces of stone, into darkness broken by the occasional flash of torchlight, have encountered one too many dragons in my life. How many does this one make now? There was the mistral in the Emerald Graves and the stormrider in Emprise du Lion... Or was that the Exalted Plains? Did I mix up the stormrider with the hivernal? Andraste's dimpled buttcheeks. I can't even keep them straight anymore. - Look on the bright side, Varric: in the end, Clarel realized her mistake and tried to make amends and that's good... as long as we disregard how fleeting that moment was. And the fact that the she was likely dead: no one could survive being so thoroughly mauled and subsequently dropped from such heights. His vision lit up in a haze of verdant - he blinked out of his reverie and shivered when wisps of magic danced from his clothes to his skin. Someone called his name (Hawke) as the world rushed to greet him. He slammed to the ground and groaned through a mouthful of dirt - except it didn't taste like dirt, it tasted like nothing. "Am I dead?" he spat to the side as a pair of steel-toed boots stepped into his blurry vision, accepting the gauntlet hand offered, "You shouldn't feel pain when you're dead."

"If this is the afterlife, then the Chantry owes me an apology," Hawke remarked as he hauled Varric to his feet, "This looks nothing like the Maker's bosom." Varric snorted as Junior, a few meters away, shot them his trademarked long-suffering glare that Hawke fondly called his patented grumpy mabari look number three.

"Warden-Commander?" Stroud yelled as he struggled to his feet and limped to the distant, hunched figure, bracing herself against an outcrop extending past the smooth cliffs of the gorge that the party somehow landed in. "Warden-Commander. Are you hurt?" Varric and Hawke exchanged a brief glance before sprinting over to her side where Tiny, drenched in so much blood that it was impossible to distinguish the pattern of his vitaar from the splatter, handed out elfroot potions to anyone who looked less than stellar.

Though Amell's hair obscured much of her face, it did not hide the clammy quality of her skin. She gripped Stroud's arm so hard that her knuckles whitened, "It's stronger here," she managed between gritted teeth. Suspended from her neck was a chain pendant, glowing red and vibrating at a speed so fast that distorted its outline. Standing on her other side, Junior furtively signaled to the rest of the Inquisition with a sharp cutting motion over his neck. **It is the Calling. Do not interfere.** "Your pain tolerance is better than mine, Stroud. Give me a moment... I wasn't prepared for the intensity."

Chuckles hummed in thought, rubbing his chin as he took a deep breath, "The enhanced effect must be connected to the nature of the demon that resides here."

"Where is here?" Tiny cautiously asked, opening his arms to encompass the preternatural qualities of
the realm they found themselves in. Water (that better be water) poured in thin cascades from boulders floating above their heads, swaying to a soft breeze that couldn't be felt. It was as if one viewed the world through tinted lenses that warped perception, making it impossible to accurately measure distance.

"The Fade," Chuckles answered, glancing back at Amell who, still using Stroud as a crutch, surveying their surroundings with curious eyes. "She opened a rift and we came through, still physical entities. I - I can scarcely believe my eyes. Who else can boast similar experiences? The seven magisters of ages past. You. And now us."

"This doesn't look like the Fade," Varric ghosted his hands along Bianca's arms, "Remember the last time we ended up in the Fade, Hawke?"

Hawke met his question with dripping sarcasm, "Oh, how could I forget? When my closest friends showed such loyalty in the face of a demon's temptations."

Meanwhile, Chuckles continued to wax poetic, pointing towards the horizon, "The raw Fade would be remarkably different for us compared to the regular visitors who sleep. I suspect that we are in the void gaps between dreams. The establishment of a rift here has anchored this territory to a corresponding rift in the physical realm, distorting the dimensions and inviting in rules that should have only governed our world - it must explain how the original magisters reached the Eternal City," in the distance hovered an island containing a shadowy metropolis with twisted spires, "I have never seen it so close. I can almost touch it."

Tiny rolled his eyes, "I can't believe you're happy about this. We're in the ass-end of demon town and you're about to frolic in sheer joy. At least Boss-" Tiny turned around at the exact moment Amell was pocketing pieces of stone extracted from a nearby rock face. She sheepishly grinned as he palmed his face, "you too?"

"Samples," she defended, "for Dagna." He crossed his arms; Amell squirmed uncomfortably under his resigned stare. "I've been dream-here before but never here-here," she twirled into a semi-circle, "You can't deny how interesting this is."

"Interesting?" Tiny parroted, "I've never been more happier to be qunari. If this is what I dream every night, I would've gone insane before I could leave my Tamassran's side." Varric was inclined to agree. "It feels" wrong- like you could go insane with your mind trying so hard to reject this reality because its obvious, as clear as the steam rising from the ground, that you don't belong.

"We're in the range of a powerful demon, an amalgamation of various fears." Chuckles gave one last longing look towards the Black City. "Inquisitor, I also suspect that it has a hand in your Calling." At his words, her hand absentmindedly stroked her pendant.

"It's probably the demon that Erimond was encouraging Clarel to summon," Amell guessed as she stretched, demeanor easing from previous lightheartedness into a solemn, professional air, "I wonder if we can stop the Calling while we're here without... Anyways, are we all done?" Everyone nodded; she clapped her hands together. "Then there's no time to waste - the Inquisition was still fighting back in Adamant when we fell. We have to return." The party murmured an unanimous agreement. "Preferably without the demon noticing..." She pointedly stared at Solas, "It doesn't matter how much in tune your song is to the Fade, and I must say that I can barely tell you apart from the ambient magic - but please lower your mana output." Varric, being a dwarf, did not feel anything change, but he heard Carver behind him give a sigh of relief.

They navigated through the maze of ruins and strange rock formations, past glittering eluvians and mockeries of domestic life - pretty vases that cried for flowers, a table shivering in the darkness, a
stuffed animal that wished to reunite with its bed, on and on, fingerprints of past dreamers dotting an unfinished landscape. The logic that ruled this place required strange elasticity of the mind to fully comprehend. (How much time have they spent here? An hour? A day? More?) Flashes of crystalline red flitted in and out of his peripheral vision. Varric stiffened. Was that the lyrium idol that he had picked up from the Primeval Thaig? What is it doing here? Didn't Bartrand sell the artifact? Didn't Meredith reshape it into her sword?

Varric wasn't the only one hallucinating things that weren't supposed to be there. The members of the Inquisition began to jump at the slightest noise - obscured corners that might have signs of hostile life. Nobody mentioned exactly what they saw past the fade miasma - nothing good, no doubt. Judging by the way Hawke was twitching, Varric would put five sovereigns down for cave spiders. "Calm down, Chief," taking point, Iron Bull shifted his grip on his maul, "This place is making you slightly insane - but it's not real. There is nothing there. Your Tamassran took care of the problem before you were even evaluated. The Iron Bull isn't scared of fade induced visions."

"You won't be an abomination, Chief," multiple heads snapped up, trying to place the source of the voice - Krem's disembodied voice - that pressed from all directions. "They'll have to get through me first!" But it wasn't Krem. Krem didn't follow the main army to the Western Approach; Krem and the rest of Bull's Chargers were on a covert assignment in the Sunstop Mountains of the Hissing Wastes. His voice was joined by the rest of the mercenary group (Dalish, Rocky, Stitches, Grim, Skinner) as he sang the Bull's Chargers song, "No man can kill the demons, 'cause they'll hit you where it hurts. They'll drag your soul to the Fade, grind bones into dirt! For every bloody body, demons will erupt. We'll sacrifice ourselves so his horns keep pointing up!"

"A Nightmare," Solas inferred as the verse repeated twice more, "We are in his lair. Keep your eyes open for lesser fears that might try to take advantage of our vulnerable states." Iron Bull's muscles strained and flexed beneath his skin, hands shaking in an effort to not descend into frenzied rage - inhale, exhale - until the echoes of the corrupted song was replaced by a oddly familiar voice that took him a moment to place.

"Dirth ma, Harellan. Ma banal enasalin. Mar solas ena mar din." The Witch of the Korcari Wilds. Asha'bellanar. Flemeth from Sundermount. Flemeth the dragon. Flemeth who gave Hawke the world's vaguest and most ominous premonition. Varric was not the only one who recognized the voice. Amell's eyebrows had risen high into her hairline while her cousins exchanged puzzled looks. Solas' ears twitched and flattened back against his skull, a sign of aggression that Daisy and Broody often used whenever threatened. "Banal nadas."

"As for the rest of you," the Nightmare's omniscient voice adopted a deep, masculine tone: Corypheus, heard during the Inquisition's first attempt to seal the Breach, that had Amell bristling, "it is almost too easy. Your fears and self-blame entwine into a beautiful spider web - its intricacy hints at a complexity of taste that will delight the palate."

"Of course, Smiley," Varric glared towards the sky, "keep talking. It's only fair that once one undergoes the treatment, everyone in the knitting circle has to see their own dirty laundry aired." He was already prepared for the taunts that would be aimed towards him: his part in the discovery of red lyrium, his part in Hawke's peril - they were nothing new to him. He could also list off Hawke's fears without hesitation. In a drawer hidden at his desk in Skyhold was a packet of letters from his best friend dating between Anders' terrorist attack and the formation of the Inquisition, written (Varric was quite certain) after one too many drinks, maudlin pathos on blood magic, Kirkwall's fall, the mage-templar war, and how the Champion fitted into all that destruction.

"Are you certain, dwarf? Do you really know the people around you? The people who care? The
people who care more than you would ever expect?" The Nightmare laughed and laughed and laughed - high pitched and chilling - as if it had said a joke that no one but it could understand. "I digress: enough about affections, not when there is so much tragedies waiting in the Inquisition - a place of hopes. An organization that will wither at your touch." ...The demon wasn't talking to Varric anymore, was he? "Old homes die and burn at your feet. Did anything you ever accomplish mean anything? Kinloch Hold: a ghost of its old glory." The temperature around them began to fall until he could see his breath condense on every exhale, till frost crunched beneath their boots. "Amaranthine: twice rebuilt and now stripped down to its skeleton once more. What will be next? Who will be next? Jowan. Anders. Cu-"

"If I may, Messere Nightmare," Hawke smoothly cut in, "Believe me, Anders and Justice were nigh unstoppable after they merged and that nobody knew that those components would be so volatile. Sela Petrae on its own-" A howl of wind whipped at their exposed skin - the sound of ice groaning as it formed and splintering as it shattered, "...Cousin?"

With her fingers curled around her cousin's wrist, Amell tilted her chin up, addressing the incorporeal entity with a smile that did not reach her eyes. "Fifteen parts sela petrae," she listed off with forced calm, "Three parts charcoal. Two parts drakestone." Color drained from Hawke's face; similarly, Varric froze in midstep - those ingredients, that recipe... "An activation rune keyed to a droplet of blood. A spark. A bomb." She carded a shaking hand through her hair as she paused to let the information sink. "Was this what you wanted, Messere Nightmare? Are you satisfied?" She stiffened when Hawke suddenly hugged her, arms wrapped around her waist, face buried into her shoulder. "A book was stolen from my library years ago," she quietly explained as she returned her cousin's embrace, "It was a gift from the Arishok: there was a page outlining a variant of qunari blackpowder." Varric pressed the heels of his palms over his eyes and slowly breathed, despondency and fatigue clouding his mind from further musings. "I didn't make the connection until now. I had forgotten about the passage. Sela Petrae... Anders... I'm so sorry - I didn't know. I didn't know that he would-"

"The fault lays not with you, child," whispered a new presence whose voice did not permeate like that of the Nightmare. "You needn't suffer." The members of the Inquisition, separated by their own mental battles warring within themselves, slowly emerged from their reveries. Wary of another fear, Varric slowly turned around, Bianca aimed towards the ground. An woman: wizened visage, bright eyes, clean Chantry robes, her brightness contradicting the very area she was in, stood by a series of steps that descended into an open marsh, waiting for their response with a serene air...

"You..." Amell whispered faintly, "I know you..."
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

HERE LIES THE ABYSS. the well of all souls.
From these emerald waters doth life begin anew.
Come to me, child, and I shall embrace you.
In my arms lies Eternity.

-Andraste 14:11

Amell

More than ten years later and they still have not managed to eradicate the scent of dragon dung from the wyrmiling lair, now remodeled to be an extension to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Then again, not many people are as intimately familiar with dragon dung as she was and probably attributed the aroma to incense and candles. Inlaid gold and silver depicted Andraste's first vision of the Maker along the trefoil arches. What was once a feeding chamber was now a baptistery lined wall to wall with icons of stylized artworks showing Andraste's faithful followers. Loose tiles at the foot of the stairs that had once been pressure plate traps were now tasteful mosaics of the religious heraldry. Pity that the Urn had disappeared so long ago - though one has to wonder what would've happened if it had remained behind the Gauntlet. Would the pilgrims have been willing to endure the trials of faith (including the walk through a wall of fire, stripped of clothing) everytime they wish to retrieve a pinch of ashes? Amell laughed quietly into her hand.

The fresh breeze from the mountain peaks reminded her of the Ferelden Hinterlands. Nibbling through a plate of assorted salé petits fours, she perched comfortably on a window ledge that oversaw the transept with a thick tome of the seven magisters who entered the Golden City in her lap - the closest source of information she could find in the library on Blights and Grey Wardens. It had taken her the better part of the afternoon to find this elusive book (meanwhile, someone had taken pains to neatly index where one can find how Divine Galatea liked her breakfast - eggs benedict with a dab of imported Antivan chili sauce on the side). Below her walked a procession ignorant of her presence: men and women, noble and poor, mages and templars - scattered among them was the odd Tal-Vashoth mercenary, Carta smuggler, and Dalish elf.

The biography covered archaeological finds: buried journals written in archaic Tevene by priests of Dumat and Razikale who had speculated about powers gained from consorting with demons in the Fade. Well... The Black City was the place where the magisters turned into darkspawn - but how exactly was the realm of the Fade connected to the Blights? Could something in the Fade have an answer to the Calling? Amell shivered as the sun began to set over the Frostbacks - every adventure she ever had in the Fade had been... Not pleasant. Shadows rose higher and higher into the ceiling. She briefly debated the pros and cons of summoning a small flame to continue her reading before shaking her head - a templar could walk by and sense her mana and in the backdrop of the war, even with the temporary ceasefire, it was foolish to take that chance.

Instead, she descended from her roost and, after securing her hood over her head, wandered through the empty halls in search of the small bedroom that the sisters had assigned to her. Their security was quite lacking and had accepted her story at face value - a devout Ferelden pilgrim visiting the
conclave hoping for a blessing from the Divine herself. Rubbing her arms, she cursed her lack of forethought to bring a heavy cloak. Usually she would be satisfied with a warming spell and Dog's comforting heat - she now has neither. Warden-Constable Howe did try to push one into her hands before she departed but she had... Amell lifted her head and frowned.

_Darkspawn? Here?_ It was one thing to follow a trail of darkspawn to the temple but to have one wandering within the temple? Her senses, though crippled from the Calling, would not lie. There was a singular taint beyond these walls. _Is this a trap?_ Amell drew her dragonbone staff. Was this what Warden-Commander Larius warned her about (disregarding the fact that the corruption should've taken Larius years ago)? "Senior Warden Janeka?" Amell murmured, tapping along the door frame softly. Mana, nearly black with taint, leaked from the cracks in the floor.

"Bring forth the sacrifice," a deep voice rumbled past the barrier.

"Shit. Now or never." With the incantation for Blizzard on the tip of her tongue, she kicked the door down, bracing for whatever was on the other side: a Broodmother, an alpha emissary, even an Archdemon. What she did not expect was a group of wardens, Orlesian judging by their armor embellishments, participating in an unknown ritual, "...what?" she blankly asked. Nor did she expect them to be lead by a gaunt figure, unnaturally skeleton-like, face marred by red crystal growths protruding out of waxy skin. _Architect? No. Someone else... That was the darkspawn she felt? _...Were the Grey Wardens and the darkspawn working together? "What?" she repeated. Clarel, you idiot, what did you do?

"Please! Help me!" Hearing the distressed call, Amell spun on her heels- she took an involuntary step back in shock. In the circle center was an old woman dressed in elaborately designed Chantry robes, wrapped in emerald curls of magic, arms extended, body rigidly straight, hovering three feet above the ground. She was the sacrifice? The woman who lectured at the pulpit during the evening lauds and led the songs?

_Divine Justinia? "What?!"_ How... Why... Wait, watch out! Amell yelped as a ball of lightning narrowly missed her head. _Maker's breath, Amell! Don't just stand there!_ Scrambling to her feet, she fade stepped, body slamming the nearest warden out of the ritual circle. The magic holding the Divine aloft collapsed under the broken symmetry. Amell grabbed the other woman's wrist and started pulling her to the door, "Come on. Come on!" She urged as the Divine weakly gasped and stumbled. "You need to get out of here!" Disregarding the cry of fury behind her, she threw a fireball at the two wardens who blocked their path. _Blank eyes and faces? Mind control? Blood magic?

"Seize the intruder!" The darkspawn ordered - the wardens dashed forward. Pushing the older woman one last time toward the double doors, Amell turned around and spun her staff, piercing the ground as ice blanketed the field, freezing the nearest wardens in their tracks. The darkspawn retaliated with dual beams of... _Red crystals? Red Lyrium? What is going on?_ She slipped into the shroud spanning the gap between this world and the Fade. _What madness is this?! Just what have you gotten yourself into, Amell? Just what..._ She materialized on the opposite face of the chamber - purple lightning leaped from warden to warden until the last arc surged towards the darkspawn who... disappeared. Her eyes narrowed. _Teleportation._

She snarled in rage, ducking around as her senses flared, a sharp itch pointing toward her blind spot. _Can't hide from a warden._ She parried his sudden blow; his eyes widened in surprise as he snapped his arm back, a strange grooved object spinning between his fingers... Oh? Amell frowned. _What's this in your hand? An orb? Is this your source of power?_ Releasing another pulse of magic aimed at the darkspawn's hands, she questioned with a bland smile designed to unsettle, "How important is this to you?" as his grip loosened; he stiffened - she pulled harder. _That's it... Give it..._ His out stretched palm was suddenly pierced by an ornamental dagger, engraved hilt glinting under the torchlight (huh, who knew that the Chantry gifts such weapons to their members... Wait,
The orb slipped out of his grasp and slammed into her palm and... "NO!" The orb slipped out of his grasp and slammed into her palm and... Pain beyond what she felt when she fell before the beacon in Ostagar. Pain that rivaled her Joining. Pain that rivaled the agony when Archdemon Urthemiel attempted and failed to possess her body. Her vision washed in a sea of green; a deafening roar forced her to her knees. Ice and fire bled out of her palm and foreign magic surged through her veins, up her arms, branching out at her shoulder until she was engulfed in blinding... There was someone screaming - it was most likely her.

"Are you sure you have everything you need, Warden-Commander?" Nathaniel Howe asked, one hand propped against the gates of Soldier's Peak, expression as stoic as the day that they first met. "I notice that your shoes aren't conducive to the harsh winter climates that you are sure to experience."

Amell rolled her eyes as she adjusted the final straps on her pack "I will be fine, you mother hen. Stop fretting. It's not good for your health." Deciding not to mention the gray hairs at his temples (he was quite sensitive to comments regarding his age - the 'you will get a barrage of fire arrows up your arse if you call me an old man one more time, Oghren, I swear to the Maker' sort of sensitivity), she gave a final salute that he solemnly returned, "Give Velanna my best."

Though his cheeks tinted pink, the deadpan tone of his voice did not change, "I'll be sure to tell everyone, including Avernus, that you bade heartfelt farewells while sobbing histrionically onto my shoulder."

"That's the spirit," she approved, waving good-bye and setting down the beaten path, eastward bound. 

Sweet, slightly minty, a light aftertaste of topsoil: she choked on a mouthful of elfroot potion, sputtering as the tonic trickled down from her lips to her collar. "You must finish all of it," someone urged and insistently tilted her head back for another swallow. As liquid heat soaked the aches in her limbs, stitching torn muscles together and soothing burns from electricity, fire, and red lyrium, a wolf mournfully howled in the distance. It felt like there was a gaping hole in her left palm. Amell opened her eyes, peered blearily down her arm, and blinked - was it possible for such a shade of green to feel malevolent and hungry? She brushed a finger across the mark and hissed when it crackled, stinging her skin. What did this mark mean? Why was it written in ancient elvish?

She tilted her head back and stared upward. The whispers of the Old Gods were louder here. Why? Where was here? The heaviness in the air was familiar, painfully familiar, frightfully... The Black City hovered at the horizon, taint pulsing outward from the silhouette like a heartbeat. The Fade... Andraste's flaming sword: how did she end up in the Fade?!

The sharp sound of shattering glass jolted her out of her reverie, she leaped to her feet and spun on her heels, embers dancing lightly on her fingers (Where was her dragonbone staff? Did it not make the journey?) - only to relax: not demons, not the darkspawn, just the Divine who was brushing dirt off her robes as she eased to her feet, her face peaceful and serene as if she had just finished a nice cup of afternoon tea. Not one hair out of place - even after such an calamity. "Thank you for your assistance," Since when does the Chantry offer lessons on how to skewer heretics with daggers? Did Leliana teach her rudimentary lessons on self-defense? Amell tilted her head to the side, "Still. I thought I told you to leave," then she added after a beat, "Most Holy."

Divine Justinia bowed her head and murmured, "How can I leave the Hero of Ferelden behind to deal with such a creature?" Barring the obvious fact that Amell was clearly the fighter of the duo while the Divine looked more fragile than Queen Anora's wineglass collection? Amell folded her arms and pinched the bridge of her nose. "My left hand would have cried if I had abandoned you
without offering any assistance." Amell wondered how much information Leliana had given to the Divine for the woman to recognize her through her disguise - foundation to cover her family markings, threadbare mercenary outfit absent of any warden insignia. ("Perhaps its wasn't just description that the Divine heard. Your fighting style gives you away, Amell," the bard's voice whispered in her head.)

Gritting her teeth as the foreign magic on her palm began to burn, Amell argued, "Leliana would've understood. She spoke of you with fondness." Not directly, of course, the bard tended not to refer people by name, save for Marjolaine, but she did tell stories over the campfire during the Blight of a woman, pure of heart, leading a reformation within the Chantry, who had once urged her to solidify her faith in the Maker. "She knows that I am capable of taking care of myself whereas you..." She let the sentence hang unfinished.

"I believe that this was the best possible outcome for both of us," the Divine said with finality. Exasperated, Amell threw her hands into the air with and spun around - why does she even bother trying to argue against such mulishness? The duo began their slow trek to a peak that appeared to the right of the Black City, where magic resembling that of the darkspawn's orb gathered and swirled, shaping itself into a strange geometric portal, a two dimensional door in three dimensional space. Neither one of them knew whether or not the odd conglomeration offered a way back to the Temple, but they both agreed that it was the best solution available. "Although," the Divine admitted as Amell energized boulders into stepping stones, "my choice may have been influenced by my wish to speak with you, Hero, regarding some matters that you can assist me with. I have been searching for you and did not wish to lose you so soon."

As she scaled the stairs that hugged steep, ninety degree cliffs, Amell dragged a hand, the right one, free of any painful mark that was absorbing her mana at a worrying rate, down her face, "Well then, you have my attention, Most Holy. What is it that you wish to discuss?" Certainly not warden business: despite their differences in opinion, both Clarel and Amell had agreed that the news of the unnatural Calling would not reach the ears of those outside the organization unless absolutely necessary. "The mage-templar war?" Amell idly speculated as they climbed. To think that she had anticipated a long night of dull, tedious research. To think that she somehow ended up in the bloody Fade (there should be demons nearby- where are they? Her presence should attract any creature in the vicinity) with a Divine that was looking at her with admiration. When the elder woman did not reply, Amell repeated with faint incredulity, "The mage-templar war? What do you think I can do for you in the mage-templar war? Didn't you arrange for peace talks? That was why you were in the Temple to begin with."

"I do not anticipate the ceasefire to last beyond this week. The war will not end, not when either side refused to send in their leaders for negotiations." The Divine wearily sighed, "A successful talk would have resulted in the complete and utter overthrow of tradition to achieve lasting peace and prevent re-escalation of hostilities. That was not the case. But I had anticipated this scenario and had made plans to form a third-party organization, one with enough clout and power to control both sides until changes can be made. Tell me, Hero, have you heard of the Inquisition?" Amell hesitantly nodded - the Chantry mothers in Kinloch Hold were very proud of their history and often used the stories of the Inquisition as a way to motivate the Templars: you come from honored roots, good ser - you are here to keep vigil over the tyranny of magic. "Then you know how effective it was in its goals and how we need that same momentum. I have asked my right and left hand to recruit various important persons, highly experienced in their respective fields, from across Thedas to assist us. Still, the Inquisition lacks a leader."

Amell nearly tripped into a crevasse when the implication sunk in. "No." Even if this newly formed Inquisition has different objectives than its predecessor and was formed by a woman whose radical notions on war and peace was likely making waves within the Chantry, Amell was first and foremost
a warden, a commander of a dying organization - she has responsibilities that will not get side-lined by... *Push aside the guilt, Amell. Nathaniel and the others are relying upon you. You're already stretched thin.*

"The war spans all the Circles under Chantry influence and no longer includes just mages and templars. The suffering of the innocents: farmers, merchants, laborers, so many - cannot be tolerated. I've passed through many empty streets, blood still staining the cobblestones, as I traveled to the Temple. You, Hero," the Divine paused, craning her neck back towards the sounds of pests scurrying just out of her line of vision, "have not been a noted presence in the world since the Fifth Blight, I understand, due to your duties. But as a mage, surely even you feel the ripples."

Amell bit hard on her lower lip and worried the skin until she tasted copper. Some rebel mages had made the trek to Amaranthine when the first wave of Annulements (massacres) and mass Rite of Tranquility rituals started in the Circles on the other side of the Waking Sea, knocking on her doors, seeking asylum. "I'm sorry. No, there's nothing I can do. Please, trust me when I say that you can find something better. Please, don't cry," she had pleaded as the Old Gods sang in her head, as the weary enchanter and her two smuggled apprentices clenched at her robe hems and refused to let go, "Go to Denerim. Tell King Alistair that I'm calling in a favor. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I can't do more."

"Spare them?!" Cullen slammed a fist against the walls of his cage in anger, "Are you willing to risk this happening again? Mages," he spat out, "are monsters waiting for the right moment to strike. Mages can burn down entire cities in a fit of pique." He ran a hand through his hair and then gestured at the stairs that led to the Harrowing Chamber, still breathing heavily from the near screaming match that he had with her, "You. I thought, of all people, you would understand!"

Amell took a calculating step forward, smiling bitterly as he took a step back, and tapped the jeweled top of her staff against the magical barrier, watching it thrum and vibrate, "Oh, I understand perfectly," she murmured as she drew back and watched as his eyes narrowed, hand twitching over his pommel, "And when I'm done, do you want me to fall onto a sword or would you gladly do the honors, Templar?" Without waiting for a reply, she spun around, brushing against Alistair's mail armor as she headed to the stairs, "Come." She did not bother to look back, "We're done here."

*Mages can burn down entire cities in a fit of pique.* Jowan's actions had an entire arling overrun by corpses. Uldred left behind walls coated with pulsing abomination pustules that crawled slowly across the stone floor, dissolving whatever rotting flesh they came in contact with. And Anders... Oh, Anders. You destroyed a world, Anders.

"The Maker says magic is to serve mankind, but we possess a responsibility to those who serve us. We cannot hail then when their magic is useful and then lock them in a cage when it is inconvenient. They are the Maker's children, not to be tolerated, but to be cherished," Divine Justinia had said in response as the duo picked up their pace and Amell released a fireball into the shadowed caves, illuminating scores of beady eyes. She grabbed the Divine's hand and sprinted toward the last winding staircase.

The power behind the Calling was at its zenith. Her left hand seemed to be a small tap away from splitting cleanly in half. She could hear Jowan's laughter echoing in the Fade, mixed with the calls of a wolf and the chittering of spiders. Her headache increased as they drew closer to the portal, demons snapping at their heels, her perception of circumstances become increasingly convoluted and vague. She was losing time - blinking through minutes of conversation. "Warden business," she had halfheartedly argued as the Divine continued her recruitment speech as pain, blinding white with a hint of green, laced across her skull. Her world spun.
"weathered hardships as a mage. A leader who prevented a civil war from erupting in Ferelden. A leader who secured the alliances of four armies and successfully directed the troops against the Archdemon." Their feet ate the ground beneath as the demons... Spiders... Fearlings... Drew ever closer. "We share a common enemy, Hero."

And then, Amell stood on a precipice overlooking all the land that she had crossed to get here, blindly swiping at outstretched fingers and missing by mere inches. No! The Divine falls and Amell could barely make out the sound of her scream among the scurrying of demons and low-pitched laughter. Her tongue felt heavy as she pushed through the rift, wading through thick molasses that sapped her energy and coherent thought. The revelations learned from the past hour slammed against her mental barrier that barely managed to separate the divide between hysterics and calm like winter's breath slowly battering against a rage demon.

When she stumbled out of the Fade into what looked like a war zone (where was the Temple? She was back in her own world - see there, the Frostbacks in the distance- but where was the Temple?) she wanted to grab the nearest soldier that was staring at her with a wild look on his face, clutching his sword and shield more like a child with a blanket than a man with a weapon, and shake him. "The wardens betrayed me for a darkspawn," she wanted to say, "the magic from the darkspawn's orb is eating away my hand. See here? Elvish symbols - like those from the Brecilian ruins. The Calling is stronger in the Fade. What do you think this means? The darkspawn did not want to see your war end. Why?" Her back bled rivulets of blood, staining her mercenary outfit from forest green to muddy brown, trailing down her arms and legs, courtesy of a fearling that tried to attach itself to her shoulders and rip into her skin. "Where's Leliana? I'm sorry that I was so hard to find - but tell her that I'll agree to lead the Inquisition if they can send someone back through for a rescue mission. I'll help you if you promise to help me. The Divine said that. Maker bless her, the Divine somehow convinced me to say yes - I forgot she was Orlesian. The Divine fell but if we hurry, maybe we can save her."

Her mind babbled like a soldier in shock, but no words escaped from her mouth. The Nightmare's claws had broke her mind open and was scooping out her ordeal in the Fade and her skirmish with the darkspawn like a ladle in a soup bowl. She was forgetting.

"Please?" Amell muttered as she stumbled over a loose pebble. "Anyone?" She collapsed face-first into the ash and didn't get back up.

**Hawke**

He had never put much stock into the power of speech as a weapon (Tool, yes - as Varric had shown countless times in Kirkwall while he interacted with his spy network. Weapon, no.) until he saw every member of the Inquisition shaken to the core by the Nightmare's mere words: trembling hands, the hitch in their breath, the sudden flare of magic quickly suppressed. The centuries of experience that the Nightmare had coaxing out vulnerabilities and peeling souls apart like onions made the vitriolic exchange between Orsino and Meredith look like a harmless slap-fight. It fed on terror, enjoying an endless buffet offered by a world that had endured many cataclysmic events in such little time. "It originally started with a desire to help," Divine Justinia (probably not her...) had informed them, "taking fear away to help the dead move on." (Was it just him or was it inevitable, given time, for spirits to transform into demons whenever they try to interact with the realm of the living?)

While Solas, Iron Bull, and Stroud managed to cross the chasm and escape through the rift, the remaining members left in the Fade were not so lucky. No one had expected their allotted window to be so small - a scant few seconds before the Aspect of Nightmare once again merged with its greater body, a writhing mass of spiders forming into one monstrous arachnid, beady spider eyes dotting its limbs like embedded black obsidian gems. There was no spirit masquerading as the Divine to save
them this time. "Do you think we can take it down?" Carver asked in a hushed voice as he craned his neck back, farther than Hawke thought necessary until he recalled that the demon took the form of individual phobias, "The Archdemon was bigger, right? Commander?"

"Junior, there are more differences between fighting a Nightmare and fighting an Archdemon than size," Varric spoke sharply as he waved Bianca at the colossus, unflinching as its head slowly swung in his direction. Hawke was willing to bet five sovereigns that Varric saw some horrific aggregation of red lyrium crystals, judging by the unnatural glow reflected in his tense eyes.

Amell ran a thumb down her facial markings. "Does it matter? There are no dalish elven archers, Redcliffe knights, Circle mages, or dwarven army that I can summon to my beck and call with a war horn. We're in this demon's lair, where power is drawn from..." she shook her head, cutting into her own thoughts, "Best not to lower morale anymore than necessary." Oh please - morale had been grounded beneath multiple boot heels since they arrived in this desolate place. "Regardless, we're going to have to fight our way through to the rift. There's no other way."

"Yes, there is," Hawke corrected her as he stared at one of the many protruding eyes that followed his movements in a predatorial manner, the blunt side of his polearm blade pressing gently against her stomach.

"No," she sharply rebuked, her hand striking out toward his grip on his weapon. He easily caught her wrist (still shaking, she has not yet fully recovered from the Nightmare's provocations).

"Not even if I volunteer myself?" He asked mildly. Varric, who had been judging the distance between the Aspect and the rift, looked back over in alarm. From his peripheral vision, he could make out Carver briefly flinching as he drew closer, brow furrowing in disapproval as he fully registered his brother's suggestion.

Her frown grew more severe: just like the one Bethany wore that split second before she moved in front of Mother to engage the darkspawn ogre. "No one here is going to be sacrificed." She stressed as she tried to pull out of his unrelenting grip, refusing to cast any spell against him - not that it would work: Carver had (with extreme reluctance) silently blanketed her surroundings with his templar aura when Hawke made a subtle gesture with his free hand (subdue from behind - do not knock out), a method of communication that the brothers had not used since the Kirkwall Circle rebellion. "Cousin," she glared at him, mana fizzling over her skin, "let go."

Carver reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder, gently pulling her back. "So, brother," he ruefully laughed as he dragged a hand through his cropped hair, "I don't suppose you would let me have a say? You know that I am equally capable of drawing the attention of the demon. Any of us, to be honest. Let me," he urged, "I'll go." Hawke narrowed his eyes; Carver looked like he was going to argue further, maybe even fight, before reason prevailed - his shoulders slumped and he backed down.

"Hawke," Varric insistently pulled at his furred collar, "You don't have to do this. There has to be another way." Hawke shook his head. Sacrifice Varric? Unthinkable. Sacrifice his brother? That idea was laughable at best - not after his father, his sister, his mother... No. Carver Hawke was all that remained of his family. Carver Hawke will not die before him. Hawke was all too familiar with wakes and the prayer vigil, refusing sleep until the coffin with the body, the coffin without the body, or the coffin with only a head that had been sewn to a stranger's body, was laid to rest. Sacrifice Amell? Not when the world needed her. He shuddered, imagining Cullen's inevitable warpath if he was to learn that his lover had perished in the Fade while facing the Nightmare.

"You don't have to do this?" Amell repeated Varric's words with disbelief, "You're not going to do this. There is no outcome where this is-" she doubled over and choked as Hawke twisted her wrist
and drew her into a hug, squeezing tight as the claws of his gauntlet gathered the blood that he had taken from a small, imperceptible nick on the underside of her palm. "You...you..." He gently smiled at her as he drew his bleeding thumb, red with their combined blood, across her cheek. *Maleficarum.* Through their connection, he whispered into her mind and willed her to stay motionless, for her muscles to relax, dissolving them of tension. "Hawke," she pleaded, "let go."

"We stand upon the precipice of change," he recited words spoken to him more than ten years ago as he transferred her to Carver who, gaze snapping up from the glowing blood sigil on his upper arm, gathered her into his arms, careful in his handling so that her legs did not buckle beneath her weight. "The world fears the inevitable plummet into the abyss. Watch for that moment... And when it comes, do not hesitate to leap." *It is only when you fall that you learn whether you can fly.* Pity that Flemeth never taught him how to turn into a dragon: that skill would be very useful about now.

"Hawke," Varric muttered as he shook his head, his voice lowering in pitch as his pulls against his robes grew more frantic, "You can't be thinking that she meant for you to-"

"What else can she mean?" Hawke snapped, waving down at the fearlings that gathered at the bottom of the escarpment. "I have made mistakes in my life. I know that I am not the only one paying for the price. Though my inability to prevent the mage-templar war comes at a close second, Corypheus was the most far-reaching." The spiders began to crawl up the walls, scrambling over each other in their haste to reach their position. The Nightmare slowly roused itself into action. "I will not allow anymore of my loved ones to die." He reached out and ruffled Carver's hair, "I will see you on the other side." Carver slowly nodded, as Amell struggled in his grasp, "I am sorry, Cousin." He didn't bother trying to ask for forgiveness: he wondered with a slight ache in his heart how this betrayal will affect her on the grand scheme of things. If she will remember him with equal fondness as he does toward her, despite how little time they knew one another. "Hurry," Hawke urged his brother, "before she breaks free from the thrall."

The Nightmare, still in its semi-weakened state, made a lunge towards the two wardens with an appendage, narrowly missing them by a hair's breadth. The Aspect snarled, turning back to the remaining two, mouth opened to reveal endless rows of grotesque teeth, multiple beady eyes fixated on their positions. Just as Carver plunged through the rift, she screamed, "HAWKE!" A chill ran down his body as if he had willingly plunged into a frozen lake. He closed his eyes and willed the echo of her voice: anguish, pain, hurt, fury - to subside from his ears.

When he opened his eyes once more, he's faced with Varric's steady gaze, having not moved during his exchange with his brother. Hawke smiled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck, "Sorry that you had to witness that, old friend." The Nightmare crawled away from the rift as its fearlings scaled its legs. "Please. Look after my cousin and brother. Make sure that the wardens rebuild. And..." His heart seized in his throat as he fumbled through his pockets, fishing out a small pendant hanging from a tarnished silver chain - revealing stylized engravings of dual birds, geometric lines descending from opened wings. "I want you to have this. It's..." He swallowed, "it's an Amell pendant." As Varric accepted the gift, fingers shakily tracing the lines toward the edges, he looked up with uncertain eyes.

"...Garrett?"

He leaned down and pressed his lips against the dwarf's forehead. "I..." he hesitated, "look after yourself, alright? For me?" And that's all he could say without bursting into tears - there was not enough time to search for the proper words that can bridge the impossibly wide gulf of understanding between them. ("You were always there. That means more to me than you can ever imagine.") The Nightmare approached with its army as Varric laced their fingers together and squeezed, one last time.
Then, Varric was gone. Hawke was alone.

The Nightmare's intent felt like starvation and hunger. The fearlings clicked their mandibles together and braced to jump. Hawke spun his polearm between deft fingers, hot embers flurrying about him, ready to burn. He grimly smiled.

_Hurtled into the chaos, you fight... And the world will shake before you. Is it fate or chance? I can never decide._

**Varric**

He stared out into a sea of silverite helmets, griffon wings extending out from the temples, glinting from the light of the lit braziers that hung from the fortress walls, casting flickering shadows at the foot of every Inquisition soldier and Grey Warden. She propped herself against Carver's proffered arm, head bent down, black hair obscuring her face. The ground beneath her boots began to frost - though Carver remained motionless, the wardens standing in the front row visibly recoiled in fear. Varric didn't bother trying to stifle the feeling of vindictive satisfaction that welled up from within.

Carver peered over his cousin's shoulder with a worried look, "Alright there, Varric?"

"I didn't answer - the odd hollow in his chest took away his ability to speak; even then, he wouldn't know what to say. The weight of the Amell pendant in the pocket of his duster had him listing to the right, as if his body expected there to be someone to catch him before his legs gave away. But no one was there."

Wrapped in a thin shroud, Warden-Commander Clarel laid upon an elevated surface, a thick door that was knocked off its hinges, serving as a platform-table hybrid; surrounding her on the floor were the many bodies of her wardens, too many to count, even more missing (eaten by demons, pulverized by magic into a small mound of dust). In the northwest corner, partially hidden in the bleak darkness, was a pile of demon and abomination remains waiting to be collected by mage scholar Helisma - despair, rage, pride, wrath... Amell slowly straightened, wiping off dirt from the Fade and blood, her own, that sluggishly oozed from multiple cuts. As she placidly rearranged her mail armor, straightening the ribbons of cloth in an attempt to present a picture of someone who did not just fight their way through an endless army of fears and terrors, mana swirling around her, condensing into a visible white aura. Wincing slightly as she pulled against a bruise, a sprain, a cut, a wound, she turned her head toward the waiting men and women below her and silently surveyed them until they began to fidget.

"Amell!" Blinking rapidly and jerking her head up, she startled from her reverie. Cullen climbed the stairs to the landing tread two steps at a time, the rest of the Inner Circle following behind him at a more sedate pace. He sheathed his sword back into the scabbard as he reached her in three broad strides, grabbing her hand and pulling her close.

"Commander? How are-" Whatever she meant to say died in her throat when she saw whatever expression was on his face, turned away so only she could see.

"Don't ever do that... I can't take it if you keep risking..." he muttered shakily as one gloved hand tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, the other cupping her face. "You're alive. You're here. Thank the Maker," and he kissed her with so much single-minded desperation that she stumbled back, immediately grabbing onto the furs of his pauldron for balance. As Carver coughed into his fist and awkwardly adverted his gaze, Varric rolled his eyes and tutted. _Honestly Curly, what was the point of threatening us to keep your relationship secret if you publicize your affections in this manner?_

Cole sidled up to Varric's side, eyes darting up towards the night sky and the canvas of stars, "So
many hurts," he quietly mourned as he wrung his hands, picking at the drying blood from beneath his nails, "would be, could be, have not, if only." He furtively glanced at the wardens and whispered into Varric's ear, "He would've cut a bloody swath to the rift if she did not return, prisoners or not - they were responsible and if he lost her again... He saw everything - the arrival of the dragon, the bridge collapsing, her fall into the beyond. But she's here now. The lion rests. All is well."

("Sorry," she squirmed restlessly under his ministrations, large hands roaming over her armor silently documenting dents and injuries, bruised ribs and cracked bone. He whispered into her ear words meant for her ears alone - a warning, a token of love, a farewell - something to make her smile - and stepped back, waving his hand at the rows of wardens that were now under the authority of the Inquisition, reverting back to the air of professionalism that he usually exhibited.)

"In war, Victory," Cole recited, voice pitched low as if pulling the words from a mind not of his own, "In peace, Vigilance. In death, Sacrifice. Why was he so willing to leap? Why the meaningless atonement? Does he not realize that I am the last Hawke. There used to be five. Now there is one." On the other end of the platform, Carver gave a full body shudder before turning his head and glaring at Cole in reproach, grey eyes narrowing into slits. Cole shrunk back, nervously adjusting the brim of his wide hat, "I'm not doing this correctly. I want to help. The stone is cracked, split, jagged. The hawk would have been safe if it had stayed, but that isn't what hawks do."

A loud thud pulled Varric from his inner turmoil - Amell had stabbed her sword down through the wooden panels and left it there, half buried and perfectly perpendicular to the ground, volcanic aurum flickering with the elemental magic of ice and fire. Her lips curled into a bland smile that did not reach her eyes - a cold wind, unnatural in the desert climate of the Wester Approach, blew low over the wardens who watched her with trepidation. She was mad, furious even - a veritable barrel of qunari blackpowder sitting next to an open fire. Giving a low whistle of appreciation, Varric crossed his arms and prepared himself for the show.

"Hello fellow brothers and sisters," she canted her head to the side, "I am sure that by now all of you know who I am. I'm afraid that I can't say the same, having never stepped outside of Ferelden until recently," modulating her voice in a tone that managed, despite its softness, to successfully hold the attention of everyone in the fortress. "And yet, in this foreign land, gazing into a crowd of strangers, I get the the unpleasant surprise that comes with the recognition of a familiar face. It is one thing to learn that your own people, those that you've recruited, trained, trusted - had abandoned you for someone else, it is another to personally see the proof." A selected few winced at the barb. "Warden Mara?" A warrior four rows back jumped to attention. Amell's fingers ghosted along the blade of her sword, "Where is your brother, Russell?"

Despite the barbut helmet obscuring much of her face, everyone in the vicinity was able to note her abject shame from her body language - a shuffling of feet, hands clenched together behind her curved back, jostling her maul that was fastened to her belt. "He had undergone the ritual, Warden-Commander."

"Not the Herald. Not the Inquisitor. Warden-Commander. "My condolences," Amell hummed after a beat. "At ease." Sighing, she flicked a wrist towards her audience - a ripple, a shockwave of attentiveness, extended out from her hand as eyes returned their gaze onto her, "To all of you, you know why I am here." Here to stop your idiocy, your decision that had cost so many lives and would have easily taken more. "And likewise, I know why you are here. Do you know what you've actually accomplished?" Her question drifted through the damning silence. "No? Here are a few numbers you might find interesting - Before the Calling, Clarel boasted of more than three hundred wardens under her command; I had around one hundred. Then, a third of my people decided it'd be better to join you and your lofty goals - that does not include those who had set out earlier to the Deep Roads for their Long Walk." She paused again - again no one spoke up: no one dared to.
"Now. Five mage wardens, including me, remain. Of the rest, of the warriors and rogues - half were sacrificed in blood rituals or killed in battle. More will die from their injuries tonight. Do you understand what you have done?"

"Extinction," Carver muttered at a volume that only Varric could hear. "Ironic, since that was what they were trying to prevent when the Callings started."

"So here is what's going to happen," Amell glanced back and crooked a finger, "Stroud? Carver? To me." Making a small noise of inquiry, Carver shuffled over to her right, rolling his shoulders back as he assumed parade rest. Stroud emerged from his corner of the platform where he was partially hidden behind Solas and Iron Bull to stand at her left, a nervously twitching hand resting on the pommel of his short sword. "May I introduce the two men that you've chased throughout Crestwood." She clapped a hand on the latter's shoulder, "Newly promoted Warden-Commander Stroud of Orlais and," she waved towards Junior who blanched in shock, "Warden-Constable Carver." Her ensuing grin showed too much teeth to be friendly, "Any objections?"

"Warden-Commander," Stroud hissed as Amell shamelessly manhandled him into place, a comical scene considering her diminutive stature compared to the larger figure of the once Senior Warden, "I must protest." Bemoaning at the lack of professionalism, he slipped back into a more pronounced Orlesian accent, "This was not part of the plan and definitely not the usual procedure for succession... Are you certain about this?

"There is no proper procedure in this scenario. You forget the circumstances behind my own quick and informal rise in the ranks. Even Warden-Constable Howe's promotion was based upon... remind me later to tell you the story - it's an interesting one. My point is that there is no definition for 'usual' in my dictionary," she chirped back before addressing the crowd once more, "Your superiors," as the crowd murmured among themselves at the news, receiving it neither positively or negatively and still too cowed to argue with the decision, she roughly pushed the two men forward. "You will obey their every order, no exceptions. If they wish to mount an expedition to the Black City, you better run to the nearest rift. If they complain about their sore feet while on said expedition, you better drop everything in your eagerness to start massaging their soles."

Stroud scowled, whispering out of the corner of his mouth, "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I really don't," she blithely whispered back, "but it has worked out so far and I've been at it for ten years. Nothing has burned down... yet. Anyways," she cleared her throat as the man made a sound of a dying cat from the back of his throat, "Focus, Stroud. I need either you or Carver to arrange patrol schedules - no time slot should be left empty. Five people at least to a group - monitor for signs of the Calling or thrall from Corypheus. Stay vigilant. I'll assign at least one accompanying Inquisition soldier for each block."

With an aggravated sigh, Warden-Commander Stroud promised with a solemn nod, "It will be done." They descended the stairs and walked past the many platoons that still waited for orders: Inquisition soldiers sharply hailed her, metal plated gloves knocking against their chest pieces, while the wardens gave a wide berth.

"Good. As you were," with one last salute, Carver and Stroud disappeared to acquaint themselves with their new charges. She turned around and walked out the western door, climbing the stairs to the battlements; Varric followed. Out of sight from the wardens and the Inquisition soldiers, she slumped like a puppet suddenly devoid of strings, the heels of her palms digging into her eyes to relieve some counter pressure building up behind her sockets, laughing slightly as he wordlessly nudged her arm in a gesture of solidarity. "What a night," she yawned. "So many things still left unfinished." She groused as she stretched, arms pulled behind her back, sighing as her spine popped
in blessed relief, "everyone underestimates the work one has to put into the aftermath." She murmured as they leaned over the parapet and breathed in the dry, desert air - a lingering scent of sulfur, deathroot, and dragonthorn. "Bodies to bury... Letters to write... Mourning..."

"How are you holding up?" Varric questioned as she restlessly drummed her fingers against the wall.

She glanced over, "better than Carver. Better than you," knowing grey eyes (identical to his) bright under the poor light offered by the constellations: Toth to the north; Fenrir to the east. I want him back. I want him back. I want him back...

Varric wiped his palms against his duster, wincing as he pressed against his bruised sides. His hair had all but fallen out of his ponytail. A bath would not be amiss to rid himself of the blood, sweat, dirt, and tears. There is a Hawke-shaped hole in his chest that he worried would whistle if he ran too fast, "Give me some time. I just..."

Laughter in the Hanged Man - the cards of Wicked Grace scattered on the table - trading jokes by the fire. Hawke slumped over the foot of his bed, too drunk to make the long trek back to his estate in Hightown. "I like it better here," he sleepily assured Varric who tried to sit him upright, waving a glass of water in front of his face in an attempt to stave off his inevitable hangover the next morning. "with you." Varric closed his eyes, "I just need some time."
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

HERE LIES THE ABYSS, the well of all souls.
From these emerald waters doth life begin anew.
Come to me, child, and I shall embrace you.
In my arms lies Eternity.

-Andraste 14:11

Varric

Dear Hawke. Remember when we wondered about the nature of red lyrium and how Corypheus managed to get his dirty hands on so much to fuel his templar army? Well, I found who the leak was. ...You've never actually met Bianca, have you? You two would've gotten along well, well enough to have Junior tear out another chunk of hair out of stress. His candle burned to the end of the wick and into the pool of wax in the holder. He blew out the sputtering flame and lighted another. She asked me if I still loved her - I would've said yes a month ago. Now I'm not so sure. She asked me if I could visit her at her workshop, see the machines that she made, marvel at them. I told her that I still needed to write letters. I think I'll even send one to Blondie. He should know; he was one of us, up until... You know.

"It's loud here," Cole whispered as he passed over another armful of candles. "But there is no conversation, just a need to whittle the angers and cool the heads. Is he truly dead? I have too much denial in me - I still expect him to return, maybe as a dragon." At the foot of Andra'se's statue, Carver jerked out of his meditative state mid prayer but maintained his position of prostration. Amell was using his knee as a makeshift pillow, having fallen asleep at the break of dawn after an entire evening of grieving.

"Junior?" Varric prodded hesitantly as Carver silently accepted the candle that Cole offered, unflinching as hot wax spilled onto his hands, and placed it on the nearby wrought iron sconce. "A copper for your thoughts? It would be better than having Kid spill it all out - he hasn't figured out what to censor yet. You should see him next to Curly - never seen that guy's face turn into such a glorious shade of red."

"It helps not to hold it in, simmering and boiling, until it escapes," Cole added with a stronger voice, bolstered by Varric's support, "It'll flee like regret. You almost blamed him for mother's death at the wake - years of being inferior, years of his shadow. But you didn't, because you love your family. Simple things-"

"I get it. I get it." Junior sliced the air with his hand in a bid for silence, "I was just thinking of something Stroud told me about the wardens." He glanced nervously down at his cousin, undisturbed in her sleep despite their conversation - hair still full of ribbons haphazardly tying her hair back, lips slightly parted, deep rimmed circles under her eyes. How little did she sleep since they had returned from Valammar? "They talk a lot in the barracks," he whispered as he transferred her head to a cushion pulled out from beneath the pews, "I knew they were looking for someone to blame. It's in human nature for one to blame everyone but one's self - but I hadn't known until last
night that the majority of their ire had been aimed towards Weisshaupt."

"Weisshaupt?" he echoed as the Chantry mothers rang the bell in preparation for the morning lauds. The smells of hot breakfast drifted through the garden from the tavern. His fingers repeatedly brushed over the stylized engravings on Hawke's Amell pendant, having transitioned roles from a last gift to a worrying stone. ""The Grey Warden headquarters? What did they do?"

Junior shrugged, "Nothing. That's the problem. Ever wondered why we saw only the Ferelden and Orlesian wardens in the Western Approach? Every other branch: Nevarran, Antivan, Free Marcher - every last one of them had been recalled by the First Warden to Weisshaupt right before the Calling. But not the two most southern countries." He picked at the dry wax on his hands, flicking them toward the bowl of offerings at Andraste's feet, "They don't know why. They think they've been left behind to die." Cole puttered aimlessly underneath the corbel. "To think that if I hadn't been transferred to Orlais all those years ago, that I would have..." Carver shook himself out of his musings and cleared his throat, "Some of the more radical minds are calling for the march up to the Anderfels to demand an explanation. We're all inclined to agree, even my cousin."

"You keep saying 'they' and 'them,' Junior. You can't separate yourself from the organization, especially now as Warden-Constable," Varric pointed out. Cole sank into the shadows as a family of three: father, mother, daughter, all dressed in their Sunday best, stopped by the door to chat with a Sister before heading to the gardens.

Carver scoffed, 'I've been carrying out my duties as Warden-Constable without trouble - maintaining the peace, sorting out the logistics behind fixing or destroying the keeps, leading the lot wherever the Inquisition needs them. It's trying to rebuild that camaraderie that we had shared that I have a problem with. These days, I can barely eat with them without feeling the urge to wring their necks. Their actions cost me a brother..." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his warden's oath amulet. "It'll be a while before I feel comfortable associating with them at the same level of trust that I had before this disaster. At least I have faith in my cousin; she does things right."

Varric glanced down at the Amell pendant that he had been mindlessly fiddling with for the past hour, "I want you to have this. "Thinking about transferring to the Ferelden branch?" He had seen the family crest many times in Kirkwall whenever he visited the estate in Hightown. Hawke had asked him multiple times if Varric would consider the possibility of staying there as a permanent resident. Rooms to spare. Why not fill them with friends? Varric had laughingly refused, said that that the stench of liquor and piss at the Hanged Man had grown on him over the years, but yeah, he'll consider the offer to bunk the next time Rivaini's drunken, off-key warbles on qunaris and ships get loud enough to reach his quarters. ...And wow, hindsight really is twenty-twenty.

Junior snorted into a hand, squinting as the sun peaked over the rooftop awnings and shined directly into his eyes, "And have a repeat of my days in Kirkwall? No thank you. I work best as a semi-independent agent that does not operate under the supervision of a ridiculously famous relative." He knowingly eyed the Amell pendant but did not mention how tightly Varric griped the chain, "Even though I don't like them, they still need me. I'm responsible for them. Stroud's behind the bulk of the rebuilding and technically hasn't left his desk in days. He's moving fast, but if he keeps refusing to delegate his work, I'll be forced to..." Trailing off mid-sentence, Carver blinked twice in rapid succession, raising a hand to shield his face from the sun as he peered behind Varric, "Good morning, Cullen. What can we do for you?"

The crepuscular light gave the newcomer's silhouette a golden halo. Had it not been for the melancholy that suffocated the chamber, Varric would have made about three Orlesian lion jokes within the span of a minute, "Hey." Instead, he placed a finger on his lips, looking pointedly towards Amell who was curled up in a fetal position by the corner, "No bad dreams so far, in case you were
wondering. You were looking for her, right?"

Cullen knelt at her side, hand hovering over hers as he watched the steady rise and fall of her chest. "I made a breakthrough in locating Samson's camp and she wanted the reports, but," he gave her a considering look; she did not stir, "I'll leave her be. It's good that she's able to rest. I haven't seen her sleep this fitfully since after Halamshiral."

"Leave her be?" Varric repeated with a raised eyebrow, "Her neck is going to kill her when she wakes. What sort of gentleman are you? Carry her back to bed, Curly."

"Make sure everyone sees you," Carver snidely added, as the ex-templar slowly turned red, "No sense in trying to hide it since you let the cat out of the bag in Adamant. Now, now, don't be like that," he continued as the man started sputtering, "have you heard the rumors around Skyhold? According to them, you haven't even-" and he then proceeded to make a series of suggestive gestures that he undoubtedly learned from Rivaini at some point during his time in Kirkwall that had Varric snickering into his palm. "Listen to our advice and you can squash the... Unless you actually haven't yet." As the prolonged silence stretched ever longer, Junior's eyebrows rose further into his hairline, "Oh. Really? On a scale from one to ten, just how frustrated are you right now?"

What can you expect from two people who are married to their work? Curly curled one arm under her thighs and another around her back, supporting her head with his shoulder, sighing, not even bothering to try and hide his blush, "Why do I even bother..." She minutely shifted in his hold and still did not stir. Neither Varric nor Junior decided to comment on the observation that he seemed awfully familiar with this position. "Before I forget - Carver. Meet in my office after the prayers. My soldiers found some hidden warden caches scattered throughout the Approach that you might find useful. Varric. Cassandra was looking for... Did Hawke give that to you?" Varric blinked at the non-sequitur and glanced down at the object that Cullen was staring at with an unreadable expression: the Amell family crest? Why was he interested in it? Is it because it's something that has to do with her? Varric rubbed the back of his head and silently nodded. "Right before he...?"

Right before he left? "Yeah." He didn't trust himself to say any more. Varric Tethras: a man of many words. These days - not so much.

"I see," the Commander said in a measured tone, frowning in thought as he turned to face the doorway. Bidding a hasty farewell, he left the chapel with her cradled in his arms. The Chants started, led by Mother Giselle who stood at the pulpit and sang the first verse, encouraging others to follow. Faith. Life. Death. The afterlife. -nothing like the Maker's bosom... Varric pressed a knuckle against his sternum to mitigate the emotional pain.

"This isn't working. You recover better alongside people, Varric." Cole reappeared in his periphery, a cheese wheel in one hand and a bundle of mint in the other. "Two pairs beats one pair. Four of a kind beats two pairs. Slip the ace of dragons into a knee-high boot. Faces change from concentration to consternation."

He chuckled and shook his head, "You're right, Kid. I could go for a couple rounds of Wicked Grace right now. Want to tag along, Junior? I promise I won't swindle you of all of your pocket change." Carver briefly deliberated on the offer before silently stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I'll take that as a yes."

"The cards like to hide," or maybe the people who once held the cards liked to hide them - Cole could never keep the emotions straight. "You said you'd teach me how to cheat."

*Your latest project? Teaching a spirit how to be human? Only you, Varric.* He hummed a wordless tune that he had heard countless times in the Hanged Man in the backdrop of tales and ribaldry, of
Blondie's indignant cries as he lost another purse to Rivaini's slight of hand, of Daisy's cheers and Aveline's exasperation, of Broody's attempt at stoic silence and Choir Boy's serene smile - Junior's letter of well-wishes from whatever corner of the Free Marches he was stationed in sitting on the table side - and at the center of attention, Hawke laughed and laughed. "That I did. That I did."

Iron Bull

"This is madness," Blackwall protested angrily over the roar of the continuous thunder as he sheathed his sword back into its scabbard. He brushed a few strands of hair out of his eyes and shook water out of his gloves, a mixture of blood, sweat, and rain sloshing onto the grass, "They're your men. You do not betray your own men."

"Decide Bull," Boss calmly ordered on his left, eyes trained neither on the dreadnought nor the hill that the chargers were struggling hold, but past the shoreline of the Storm Coast to the faint outline of Dragon Island where the Vinsomer once dwelled. Even through the curtain of rain, Iron Bull could see Skinner spit out a mouthful of blood, wiggling a tooth loose with her tongue, glaring at the Tevinter mages that were slowly advancing to their point.

Gatt pulled at one of Bull's straps with enough force that he buckled, bending low enough to hear the elf hiss into his ear, "I know that look on your face, Hisssrad. Don't do this. Don't you dare. Your life here was temporary. It was supposed to be temporary."

"I am not deciding for you," Boss continued as the dreadnought finally emerged from the fog. The Venatori troops renewed their assault on the hill. Grim staggered to his knees from a blade that slid cleanly into his ribs. "I will not be the one making the call. I've had about all I could take. I just finished yesterday evening judging the last of the wardens that surrendered themselves to the Inquisition. Forgive me if I am not enthused enough to make another life or death decision."

"Humiliation. Imprisonment. I need something." the warden, a warrior, polished armor free of blood, supplicated at the foot of the throne, forehead touching Boss's shoes. "Do not absolve my actions. Do not set the precedent that the Grey Wardens are above reproach. I want to do good. I need to make reparations." The Orlesian nobles that lingered by the chamber doors tittered behind fans that snapped open and shut in rapid succession. Lady Josephine made a quick notation in her clipboard.

"None of this. Get up." Boss tried to haul the senior warden back to her feet but was met with stubborn resistance. She slumped back onto the throne and dragged a hand over her face as she laughed with no humor, "You were always the righteous one, Ser Ruth. Please get up." The senior warden shook her head. Judging from Boss's expression of resigned bewilderment, this was not the normal behavior of Ser Ruth.

"Warden-Commander... Inquisitor... Most Holy. Set me on a path for forgiveness. I cannot face the Maker as I am now." By the door of the undercroft, Stroud and Carver watched with a mixture of trepidation and exhaustion, eyeing the nearby audience with wariness. Although Boss had allowed Clarel's wardens to stay and rebuild, the not so clandestine whispers around Skyhold had made it plain that some wished otherwise.

"Come back to Ferelden. We miss you." Boss pleaded, shaking the warrior's shoulders, rattling the metal pieces that were loosely bound over her navy blue gambeson. "It's not too late. We'll fix this. We'll forgive you."

"I can't forgive myself." The words echoed in the large chamber, overriding the low, displeased murmurs from a few nobles that had wished to see a more dramatic theatre-
like exchange: something intangible clicked at that moment. Three choices suddenly became one and instead of mercy, the Inquisitor was forced to choose death.

Snarling in frustration, Gatt bared his teeth, "Is this not for your benefit, Lady Inquisitor? It is selfish to foist the responsibility onto your compan-" and then he yelped, jumping back as a small sliver of frost spread from the grass beneath Boss's boots towards him. "You- you-" She smiled - close mouth and dangerous eyes - the same smile that held the apprehensive attentions of everyone, ally and enemy, in Adamant.

"My responsibility?" she mused, tapping a finger on her cheek, "Is it my responsibility? It might have been when we first arrived. And yet, I manage to find the luxury to not care. Listen," she held up a hand before anyone could make another indignant protest, "Here's something that I've recently calculated and decided - the assets gained by the Inquisition is equal no matter what the outcome." Spellfire grew more heavy along the west end but the dreadnought was still afloat - the dreadnought will survive so long as the Venatori concentrate their efforts on the opposite ridge. Dalish was blasted off her feet by spellbinder's a spirit bolt. The chargers will not survive this skirmish if he does not act.

"Hisssrad's mercenaries are not worth the dreadnought and an alliance with the qun."

She angled her head to the side, eyes flickering over to the two Venatori smugglers that struggled to carry their large crates of red lyrium to safer drop points, "They are to me." How much value can be placed on trustworthy camaraderie and brotherhood? How much value can be placed on a home whose principles he was beginning to doubt? "Therefore, the terms aren't mine to dictate." Not yours to dictate? Then it lands on... "Bull?"

Qunaris were the invaders of the south - his Tamassran taught him that there was no home to make here. "Boss. I..." An inexplicable dryness welled up in his throat, preventing him from speaking further. Stitches has a half-finished bal-chatri sequestered in the cabinet next to Sera's room. Going to finish it one day, maybe when things die down a bit. I can catch us each a falcon - like Sister Nightingale and her ravens. Skinner hoards Orlesian masks, personalized with hand drawn Venatori caricatures. Rocky is still trying to find the secret ingredient for qunari blackpowder, jokingly claiming that he might join the Qun just to get his hands on the recipe. Dalish struggles to coax Felandaris seeds to grow in her garden. Grim has taken upon himself to scatter all forty-eight copies of Varric's Hard in Hightown around Skyhold for curious passers-bys to pick up and read.

"Copper on the lips." Cole crouched over the cliff, plucking off stems of embrium and weaving them into a small flower crown, "Dalish lies beside me. He'll come, he'll call, he won't leave us. Horns pointing up." We'll sacrifice ourselves so his horns keep pointing up! We'll sacrifice ourselves so his horns keep pointing up! On the window sill next to Iron Bull's favorite armchair in Herald's Rest laid a large supply of stuffed nugs with wings that Krem had lovingly sewn together from scraps of cloth and cotton. Once they get back from this expedition, he planned to see how far they would fly out of Skyhold when launched from Commander Cullen's trebuchets. Once they get back... "They are your men, Bull," Blackwall growled, "I thought you were better than this." Better in what manner - to sacrifice or to not sacrifice in the name of...? Loyalty to the homeland? Loyalty to another definition of home? Home is made of people.

"Tal-Vashoth. You'll become Tal-Vashoth, Hisssrad," Gatt warned. As if he didn't already know that. Iron Bull grounded his molars together, the grating sound of the rubbing enamel acting as a distraction against the tension that strung his body tight. "Why are you- are you truly throwing everything away for them? You- I can't believe you-"

"The dreadnought or your chargers, Bull." Boss's wan and carefully neutral smile did not falter. Stitches cried out as he was struck from behind by a horror spell.
"I got your back, Chief," Cole said.

Iron Bull blew the horn.

The low note blared through the sounds of the battering rain, echoing off the slopes of the cliffs. Immediately, Krem raised an acknowledging hand, slung Grim over a shoulder, and retreated with the company down the eastern slope. The Venatori troops quickly overtook the post and rearranged themselves into a diamond position. The mages aimed their staves at the vulnerable dreadnought and renewed spellfire against its creaking hull. "Thank you," Blackwall fervently whispered as the ship began to sink along with the tenuous bond Iron Bull held with the qun. Gatt did not even wait for the dreadnought to detonate, muttering qunlat (as-eb vashe-qalab) under his breath as he stormed back to camp. The war horn slipped from Bull's fingers, hitting the grass in a soft thud.

"I'll have to pen a few letters to Par Vollen," Boss mused as the small shift of pressure from the shockwave of the initial explosion reached them and the fires of gaatlok danced merrily over the wreckage. "I don't know how much pull the Arishok would have over the Ben-Hassrath but the amount of cookies and cakes I have invested to keep our pen-pal correspondence alive must mean something to him."

"You're Basalit-an, among other things," Bull replied distantly, referring to her many titles she had worn before becoming Herald and Inquisitor - his head still reeling from the paradigm shift, the reality of the consequences for his actions finally hitting him across the head by a metaphorical satakas iss. Tal-Vashoth... He swallowed heavily, feeling slightly nauseated from the salt breeze that wafted into his nose, suppressing the sour bile that rose to the back of his throat. He felt like an Orlesian noble with the vapors. Tal-Va-fucking-shoth... Krem and the chargers were to never know about this - ever.

"They'll send at least one assassin after you, for posterity's sake," she cautioned as Krem reappeared below the treeline, pouring a rejuvenation potion down Dalish's throat.

"Easy enough," he grunted as he peeled off the upper half of his battlemaster coat, growling low in his throat when one of the clasps refused to budge under his claws, and left it half hanging off his body. He could deal with assassins in his sleep, not to mention the Ben-Hassrath wouldn't be wasting the good ones on him. It's everything else that is bothering him. True grey ones. "Boss?" He was without anchor - he was no longer Hissrad (then again, maybe he had stopped being Hissrad a long time ago). "Did I do the right thing?" The cathartic rain was everlasting and relentless.

She craned her neck back to stare at him, grey eyes matching the grey mist matching the grey seas matching the grey skies. "Do you feel regret?" Iron Bull helplessly shrugged, stepping out to the edges of the cliff where Cole weaved elfroot vines into bracelets and necklaces to leave later in selected corners of the Skyhold gardens for kids to find. He glanced down, reveling in the tightness in his chest that comes with mild vertigo - meters below, Krem glanced up and gave a one arm salute. Skinner playfully socked Stitches in the stomach, grinning manically from the adrenaline that comes when skirts the line between life and death. "You should take them out for drinks when we get back to Skyhold."

No regrets. "You joining us?"

She hummed in thought, "No," she decided after deliberation, "I'm afraid I'll be too busy tonight. I have to help the wardens prepare their departure northward," she clucked her tongue, "they plan to leave at dawn."

"Ser Ruth is outfitted with whatever she needs for the Deep Roads," Warden-Constable Carver reported, flicking a hand against the requisition sheet tacked on the nearby wall,
"We'll escort her to the nearest entrance where we'll then plot our course towards Anderfels. We'll report whatever the First Warden has to say in defense for his non-actions via Sister Nightingale's ravens. I promise we'll watch ourselves," he sharply saluted, "Weisshaupt or bust, Warden-Commander. It's been a pleasure."

"I have a feeling that tonight's drinking is going to last longer than normal. Special occasion, you know?" he said wryly with a wink. "Bring some wardens along - I heard that they can get pretty rowdy in their cups. Just in case, I'll save you a couple of seats."

**Solas**

"I forget that spirits thrive in transience of existence and that their nature differs greatly from those of the living," Solas mused as Cole handed him another bucket of paint, lid nowhere to be found, untouched, unmarred, pure. "Her sadness stemmed from me and not from her own death. I've troubled her in her last moments." The paintbrush hairs disappear in a gentle swirl of white as he climbed the ladder, bucket in hand. The wall was rough here, the outer stucco had chipped away from years, centuries of disrepair, revealing the rough masonry underneath - easily fixed by a few extra coats.

Cole hesitated, struggling to find the proper words, "You are a friend of Wisdom. She worries because she knows you." Under Solas's guiding hand, the spirit carefully outlined a shield, half white half black. "Her death made you angry," he mourned as Solas picked up a brush, navy blue - colors of the warden heraldry, and brushed in the delicate details, the sharpness of talons and beaks, the bursting plume of feathers, wings outstretched in preparation to fly, and dual challenging eyes. "You turned into a predator. We worried." The torchlight threw simmering shadows - the griffon seemed to breathe.

Solas grimaced, pressing the end of the brush into the skin between his eyes, trying to relieve the headache that began to form and throb. His recent dreams were filled with pillars of ice rising in the burning fields of the Exalted Plains. A pride demon stood in the center of the summoning circle, staring out with her eyes, glowing with magic from the Fade, lightning crackling down thick arms. *Ir abelas.* And watching them from a safe distance, partially sheltered by a large boulder, quaking with fear, robes positively shaking, were three mages who had the foolish notion to... Death for a spirit was a complete obliteration from existence: the Fade gives and takes - it gathers the lingering energies to shape into another idea, another emotion. No one but he will remember her.

"Solas?" The Inquisitor's hand pulled on his shoulder as he stalked away from the shore, lingering wisdom overtaken by unadulterated rage. The three mages emerged from their hiding place, blinking rapidly like newborn babes at the sun that shined into their eyes and blinded them to his killing intent. "Solas," her voice grew darker, warning imminent in her tone (he wondered how far he could push her), "They were ignorant. There was no ill-intent. If you continue down this path, you would not do any favors to yourself - you have to teach them." No. But the act of killing would bring closure - the sort of closure that dripped in the blood of screaming victims.

"I'll say! You have my thanks." The self-proclaimed leader that had initially asked for their help blistered, face reddening as his little eyes slid from her to him, taking out a handkerchief to mop his brow. "That thing" *Not a thing. A friend. And you, in your idiocy..." was quite dangerous, frightening too. I'm so glad you managed to kill it. I thought we were all done for!" *Mala suledin nadas..." You seem like the strong sort. Can you spare a couple of hours to escort us back onto the main road? We fear more bandits," the mage nodded towards the surrounding fires that licked the tall grass and bodies of corpses into ash, "it was why we had undergone the ritual in the first place."
They summoned her because of bandits?! He stalked forward, whipping out his sentinel staff, blade end dimly glowing red. The mage took a frightened step back, words pouring out of his mouth, indignant confusion, maybe even a poorly aimed apology, for he still did not know what he did wrong. The thought made Solas angrier. He bared his teeth, ears pinned back to his skull. She was forced against her nature because of bandits?! She is dead because of bandits?! "Solas!"

He howled.

In the end, there were no bodies of the mages or the bandits, there were no ice pillars, there was no demon or spirit, there was no summoning circle. Solas stood in the midst of black ash, seeing ash, tasting ash, smelling ash - acrid on his tongue, burning in his nose. He inhaled deeply. When he opened his eyes, he met the gaze of the Inquisitor and refused to feel shame from his actions as he observed the minute emotions flickering across her face: shock, wariness, worry, curiosity, all of it immediately masked with a blanket of calm. "Do you feel better now? You were like a wolf out there," she observed, bending down to pick up the binding tome, half destroyed, page opened to the damning ritual that started this mess, "Do you mind if I keep this?"

Is he still a wolf? Does not a wolf need a pack to thrive? He shook his head, waving a hand in her direction as if to tell her to do whatever she must. "I," his vision blurred at the edges, "I trust you to fix this oversight in knowledge. I need some time alone." She took a pointed step back: a clear sign of permission. "If you would excuse me," he muttered as he fade stepped out of sight.

Cole wiped his paint stained fingers against his leather shirt, playing with the loose threads fraying at the hems as Solas summoned a bucket of light blue paint into his hands, "Your lamentations join the many others. You leave them alone, but they don't leave you alone. I can't help you if you don't grieve." Above them, Dorian paced restlessly in his study, footsteps against the wood echoing off the walls of the atrium.

"My regrets are older than you, Cole," Solas murmured, as he tested the first coat - damp - he needed to wait another minute. "Please, do not concentrate your efforts on me."

"I don't want to be like that," he said morosely as he filled in the blank spaces with more white, leaning forward on his toes to reach higher, "She fights against the binds, thinking of the one who walks her realm like a wooded path, ease in his gait, searching for wisdom. She could not safely cross the Veil, but she had enough will to panic. Ir abelas. She had enough personality to apologize." Solas craned his head back and stared at the frescos unseeing - mind struggling to construct barriers meant to obscure and hide - too many secrets within him threatened to be revealed every second the spirit was at his side. Cole jumped off the platform, wandering over to the other murals that depicted the various trials and accomplishments that the Inquisition had undergone: the Breach, the formation of the Inquisition, the alliance with the rebel mages, the fall of Haven, Halamshiral... "You're quiet again. I'm sorry."

"You are not like the others," Solas assured him as he stepped back onto the ladder, the scaffolding creaking at the sudden loss of weight, "demons formed by the rift are spirits that are pulled into our world against their will, the shock twists their energies and emotions. You are not like that. You came to us before the Breach."

"Wisdom into Pride. Hope into Despair. Patience into Rage. Nightmare was just trying to help take fears. Vengeance was once Justice." Cole began to tremble. "Justice just wanted to help the mages. Frustration at his inability to make change, he doesn't know why he can't act in the way he's meant
to. Anders does not help. Then Anders does help. They rationalized: the few for the many. The world needs to shake. People need to die. I do not want to be like that."

"As long as you are not contrary to your nature, you will be fine." Those words did not soothe him - Cole's hands reached underneath his wide brim hat and dug into his scalp. His words grew louder as he moaned, as if struck by a physical pain.

"The Fade does not deal in absolutes. The Tevinter mage said that it was inevitable. He tried to control me. That spell at the watchtower was aimed for me. What is Compassion's demon? There's so much suffering. It is inevitable." Cole sank to his knees, dragging fingers down his cheeks, nails biting into skin, as if a painter had taken a red brush onto him. The commotion was attracting some attention from the upper floors; Dorian peered over the railing, staff in hand. "What if the Elder One takes me? I want to help but this world is different. I do not want to be like that. I do not want to be like that. I do not want to be like that. I do not want to be like that. I do not want to be like that..." he chanted the mantra, each recitation at a faster pace, "I do not want to be like that. I do not want to be like that. I do not want to be like that..."

"Cole..." Solas's hands hovered over the wailing boy, ghosting over his back and down his arms. "Cole!"

The door that connected his study to the throne room burst open. Solas turned. Varric and the Inquisitor stood at the doorway. As Varric sprinted past her, frantically trying to calm the boy down to no avail, her eyes flickered between the freshly painted Grey Warden heraldry and Cole. "Solas," she stated in a measured tone, "What did you do?" And before Solas could open his mouth, words ready to give defense, to tell of their exchange, to declare himself blameless from these proceedings, Cole began to scream.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

**HERE LIES THE ABYSS.** the well of all souls.
From these emerald waters doth life begin anew.
Come to me, child, and I shall embrace you.
In my arms lies Eternity.

-Andraste 14:11

**Varric**

"Save a seat for me," she had promised as she peered over a stack of books and papers that littered her desk, carding a hand through long tangles of hair that resembled more of tree roots instead of individual strands, "I'll be down there within the hour," and as time ticked on by from the longcase clock, Varric almost thought that she wouldn't make her deadline (dark eyes and stress - maybe she should retire early to bed) until he, and only he of the group, spotted a shadow within a shadow. Her silhouette barely a discernible outline that shook slightly in mirth as Curly reached the end his story of the unfortunate templar recruit who had walked into the dining room in nothing but his knickers.

To be honest, the Commander wasn't half bad of a storyteller: he certainly knew how to control the attention of the room by presence and tone - enrapturing the audience like theatre.

That is until her muffled laughter abruptly escaped from behind her hand and suddenly, the charisma that surrounded the ex-templar vanished as if it was never there. He twisted around so quickly that he almost fell out of his chair. "How much did you hear?" He asked, a flush starting from his neck and rising up to meet his ears.

"Enough," she replied simply as she emerged from the dark alcove, crossing the room as her eyes swiveled appreciatively from corner to corner. Varric grinned - he had taken great pains to book this suite for the evening, paying off some of the workers to make sure that they won't be disturbed by admirers. He kept the atmosphere rustic: thick oak chairs and tables, a wood burning open fireplace, red carpet to match the curtains, the feeling of warmth and hearth. Curly's arm wrapped around her waist as she dropped her head to plant a kiss on his forehead, a gesture of affection so easily given - really spoke volumes on the (ridiculously, slow paced) progress of their relationship.

Sera blinked sleepily, raising her head from her pillowed arms, waving her empty tankard in the air as if asking an invisible barmaid for a refill, "Is Quizzy laughing too? No. I know that face..." she slurred happily (elves and their lack of alcohol tolerance - something about their compact, stick-thin bodies... though that wouldn't explain the dwarves' disproportionate tolerance.) Varric wagered that in another thirty minutes, she would be out for the rest of the night. "'Shit - you were there?"

Amell was still chortling behind her hand as she moved to the chair that Josephine had gestured grandly towards as she pushed a full glass of Chasind Sack Mead toward her waiting hands, condensation trailing down from the glass. "Maybe,," as she settled in, an elbow on the armrest, legs crossed, listing to the side, angling her head away from the light as she directed an impish grin across the table towards Curly who had buried his reddening face in his hands. "It's out of my hands - not my story to tell."
"You might as well finish it," he muttered, "You already implied too much." She gave a noncommittal hum as she slowly sipped her drink, closing her eyes as she relished the cloying taste on her tongue - the bite from the alcohol, the smooth texture of the honey, a hint of apple blossoms, the scent of cinnamon, ginger, and cloves.

"Wait," Seeker narrowed her eyes; silence fell over the table until the party could clearly hear the merry crackling from the fireplace and Maryden's songs in the main hallway, "am I to assume, based upon your words, that the unnamed templar recruit here was..." As everyone else mulled over her words and came to her similar realization, Varric felt the beginnings of a grin pull at his face. You did not, Curly... The couple exchanged a wordless look, a conversation passed between them - at some point, he must have given her permission to continue because she broke eye contact with a triumphant grin.

"It's not obvious yet?" Amell offered a languid smile to her audience, "I'll give you a hint. You know him." And that sentence cinched everyone's suspicions.

Iron Bull roared with laughter, slapping a hand across his knee, drowning out everyone else's good humored taunts. A waitress peeked her head through the doorway in alarm at the sudden noise but relaxed when Varric discretely waved her away, dimly wondering how the story would have been told from Amell's point of view. Was she in the dining room when he made his faux-pas? Did they know of each other then or were they still strangers? Curly gave an aggrieved sigh as he turned towards Amell, "Not another word unless you want me to start listing all of your antics you pulled in the Circle."

Varric leaned forward, elbows propped against the table, reaching into his duster for his trusty notebook and pen. This ought to be good. "Ooh," Buttercup sighed, cradling her face in her hands with a look of drunken, unholy glee, "do tell, Cully Wully."

Pulling a face, Amell leaned back and crossed her arms, "I was well behaved, veritable saint." Cullen made a noise at the back of his throat, clearly believing otherwise, "You set fire to Ser Ryan's robes." Blackwall choked on his stout, sputtering across a good portion of the table in surprise. "I had to hold him back before he could smite you!"

"It was an accident," she protested, eyes widening to emphasize her innocence, "I tripped over Anders' cat mid-spell. Ser Ryan should've known to negate the fireball before it reached him instead of hopping around screaming like a damsel in distress." Seeker pinched the bridge of her nose as if warding off a headache. "You saw! You even laughed! It was just a really, well-timed accident." She tapped a finger on her lower lip in thought, descending into mutters, "though I wouldn't put it past any of the apprentices that day to try and stick a hex on that man... Deserved it too - made Surana cry - that incorrigible."

"If I may ask, Cullen" Dorian interrupted as Josephine dealt him in, peeking at his cards and raising the pot by two silvers, "is our Inquisitor's past filled with this odd combination of grace and hapless clumsiness?" Everyone perked up - another story?

"Yeah," Sera added as she tossed in a handful of change, "One moment Quizzy 'as moving 'll over the Hissing Wastes," her right hand began to 'walk' with her index and middle finger up her other arm, mimicking the fast teleportation of a fadestep, "the next," whoosh - the hand dropped as it 'stepped' off her elbow, "gone into a canyon."

Dorian cleared his throat as if preparing for a speech - what came out of his mouth was a parody of Amell's Ferelden lilt, "I did not mean to do that! I'm good, if you were wondering! I can still crawl. Actually, no... Toss a few health poultices over the cliff, will you Dorian? Thanks." In all honesty, it
was a pretty decent impression of their Inquisitor's reactions to her own mishaps. Varric wondered whether he should disclose her tendency of running unknowingly headfirst into dragon territory no matter what regions of Thedas they explore (and somehow, by an unfortunate stroke of luck, dragging Varric along every single time).

"Clumsiness? Says the man who keeps breaking his own bed," Amell retorted as she reached into her collar, pulling out a couple pieces of crisp parchment, "Know what this is? I've gathered all the requisitions you've ever submitted for bed frames. And here," she whipped out one from the top of the stack, "is your most recent one that I was working on before I arrived - requesting the following actions: reinforcing the brackets: replacing oak to ironwood. Also, these new dimensions are triple in size compared to the original. I don't know why the sudden increase... It's as if -" Iron Bull let out a loud bark of laughter. Dorian turned into a lovely shade of puce as he reached over and swatted the qunari over the horns. Similarly, Amell's cheeks pinkened, eyes widening as she came to the obvious conclusion, "Oh. I get it. Qunari-sized. How did I not see this?" Varric rolled his eyes and loudly tsked: funny how she was the last of the Inquisition to know. Oblivious. Then, she glanced down and squinted at the forms, "And here - six inch diameter bedposts? What in Andraste's flaming sword are you doing to need bedposts with ridged-" and that was when Sparkler, with his dignity in tatters, tackled her from across the table.

"Should we do something?" Cole anxiously traced the grooves in the table.

"Nah," Varric decided as he watched the ensuing scuffle by the fireplace, "It's how they show that they love each other."

"Did you cast Barrier on yourself?" Amell was laughing as she raised the hand with the requisitions above her, the other hand pushing against Sparkler's shoulder, "You stoop so low, Dorian!" No one bothered to break up the impromptu brawl. Tiny gave the remaining members at the table a sly wink - though how he did so, Varric wasn't sure, seeing that he had only one visible eye.

"Bright. Warm." Kid shyly glanced around at the livery. "People. Family."

Dear Hawke. We sent your brother to the Anderfels with our blessings. Though he was spoiling for a fight, Stroud was wary. We'll see how that turns out. On the other hand, I think I might actually feel like I'm starting to belong. I think I found a family. Kid is a pet project of mine - I promise that there wouldn't be a repeat of Anders. He's learning to tie his shoes. Buttercup, despite her best efforts, still can't get any further than two tankards of ale before falling into her plate. Seeker managed to loosen up enough to accept my invite. She doesn't know the exact rules but-

Josephine happily clapped her hands together as everyone showed their hand, "Dealer takes the pot. I win again!" Her exclamation was met with groans as she raked in the stack of prices. A pile of gold, silver, copper, some jewelry, folded papers with hastily written down favors, and pieces of clothing and armor. Iron Bull had a disgruntled expression, having lost his last supply of horn balm. Sera had long sank out of her chair, disappearing under the table - light snores audible between lulls in the conversation. Seeker was regaling a tale to Blackwall about the early days of the Inquisition - namely that one incident where a lost druffalo had imprinted upon Amell and followed her from the wilderness all the way to Redcliffe Farms.

Slightly mystified, as if suddenly waking from a dream, Amell stared at Josephine's rapidly growing pile and then at her meager winnings - five coppers, Curly's left glove and fur pauldron. "You should play with Dog," she said to the Antivan.

"NO," all the regulars of Herald's Rest immediately rebutted.
"I like Dog," Cole frowned as Amell blinked, a bit taken aback by the quick response, "Dog always brings back things I throw."

"Not that kind of play," Varric corrected, patting on the boy's arm as the rest of the Inner Circle gave a collective shudder.

"That dog has a better head for tactics than many of our officers," Cassandra declared, eyebrows furrowing as if she was uncertain whether to be insulted or impressed, "he constantly bests me in chess."

"At least Solas lets me keep a bucket to cover my bits for the walk of shame back to the stables," Blackwall grunted as he downed another shot of Legacy White Shear, as if the alcohol could chase the memories away, "Your pet left me with nothing. Never again. Fereldens..."

"Her mabari has no tells, true," Cullen leaned across the table, both hands flat on the wood as if he was preparing to stand, "On the other hand, I think I just about figured you out, Lady Montilyet." His lips curled, "deal me in again."

"My my, Commander," Ruffles grinned as she shuffled the deck and dutifully handed him five cards face down. If she was Orlesian, she would be cackling behind a mask and fan. "Is that a challenge?"

"Umm, Cullen?" warily scanning his lack of armor that he had lost last game, Amell started, chewing on her lower lip, "If I were you I wouldn't press-"

"But Inquisitor," Josephine smoothly interjected as the man in question narrowed his eyes, "if our Commander here is confident enough in his abilities, I don't see why we should stop him." Varric pointedly pushed his chair back two inches from the table, signaling that he was abstaining from this round. Everyone else followed suit.

After a moment of thought, Amell offered Ruffles an admiring glance, "Devious, aren't you? Spent too much time with Leliana in your youth?" Amell drained the last of her mead, "I had wished that she would be with us. Alas..." Personally, Varric was glad that Nightingale did not join them - the amount of blackmail that she could have gain from this one evening alone would have had the entire Inner Circle eating out of her hand from sheer terror. "But Cullen, you don't really have much else but the clothes on your back. Are you really-" She waved a hand in his direction; his expression wavered between regret and determination.

"Can't back out now, Curly."

Ruffles giggled as she flicked a wrist, drawing a card, "I'm sure you have something, Commander Cullen, of equivalent exchange to bring to the table. Pay close attention, Lady Inquisitor Amell. Consider this a present from me to you."

- and that was how Curly lost all of his clothes to Ruffles in a game of Wicked Grace.

Yours, Varric.

**Cullen**

She paced from one end of the carpet to the other, the light from the fire a stark contrast against her silhouette as she repeatedly ran her hands through her hair, lips blood red from her habit of biting them when anxious. "Blood mage," she moaned as she kicked at an open pack propped against the stone wall, "of all things! Why didn't I notice? When did he start?" - clothes, health poultices, lyrium potions - nearly full, as if she was about to... Leave?

"Amell?" She nearly jumped out of her skin at his voice, spinning on her heels to face
him, eyes bloodshot. *She's been crying.* "Amell. Talk to me," he pleaded as she sank slowly into the armchair by the fire, "The Knight-Commander said that you were leaving" *me* "the Circle to become a Grey Warden." She averted her eyes; his heart sank from the unspoken admission, "But... But you just undergone your Harrowing!" He had stood over her sleeping body that she had left to visit the Fade, blade held ready at her throat, bracing for the first signs of transformation. He had carried her back to the Apprentice Quarters when she proved too weak to make the journey on her own. He had congratulated her (stammering through every other word) on her promotion.

She closed her eyes, tilting her head back as she massaged the skin between her eyes, "It was either that or the Aeonar." She laughed without humor, "Didn't you hear? Jowan is a blood mage and I helped him escape." Her other hand gripped hard against the armrest, emitting faint tendrils of frost that slowly covered the wood, "Void... Void take... No one should be forced through the Rite of Tranquility. He was my oldest friend...and harmless - on the path to becoming a Formari mage. Still, not an excuse... Who taught him blood magic? I asked First Enchanter Irving if that man... But he said" Her frantic ramblings stopped, replaced by quiet sobs as he bent down (blood on her robe hem - Jowan was the last apprentice he would have suspected to practice the ways of the Maleficar.) and embraced her, squeezing tightly.

*I'm sorry* - he wanted to say. "When are you leaving?" He asked as her hands scrambled for purchase, finally resting atop of his arm guards.

"As soon as possible," after a beat, she slowly extricated herself from his arms, wiping at her eyes angrily as if tears were an unacceptable sign of weakness. "I had dreamed of leaving the Circle but not like this. A battlemage, yes. An exile - not quite."

As soon as possible? But he still... "It's not too bad. You like the fabled Grey Wardens," he nudged her shoulder in an attempt to cheer her up, "you've read all the books in the library that detailed their history." How many times had she taken advantage of his height, asking him to retrieve all the tomes that she was unable to reach? How much time had he spent during his shifts in the library watching her study at the nearby table, daydreaming of her fingers, her eyes, her mouth...

"If only griffons weren't extinct," she sighed wistfully, gaze shifting from him to her backpack that lay innocently, a sad smile pulling at her mouth. "Cullen. I..." She reached into her satchel, "Here, I want you to have this." She pulled out a long chain with an etched stone set in silver, depicting two stylized birds facing one another, "It's my family pendant. It's the only thing I have from before. Jowan's gone, yes," she shakily exhaled, "But you... You've always been there for me."

Why was she giving him something she should consider priceless? Did she really think that highly of him? Could she feel - "Amell..."

"I know that mages aren't supposed to keep anything from their families," she hurriedly added, "but that rule is never enforced. I don't even remember how my parents look like and I only have this," she pushed the necklace into his hand, "will you hold onto it? Keep it safe? I mean, you aren't obligated to - you can always-"

"Amell." Her jaw clicked shut as she stared, wide-eyed, at him. He returned her gaze with a weak smile, "Thank you. I..." The tension in her shoulders relaxed once she realized that he had accepted her gift. *Come on, Cullen. This is most certainly your last chance of telling her how you feel. Maker's breath. She still doesn't know. But before he*
could gather his courage and say the proper words, there was a knock on the door.

She rushed past him, scrambling to pick up her travel belongings. "That'll be Warden-Commander Duncan," she mumbled, hand hovering over the door knob. She steeled herself, rolling her shoulders back, "Now or never - time to face the music." She turned back one last time and flashed a smile that he wouldn't see for another eleven years, "Look after yourself, Cullen." And then, she was gone.

"Reflexes are fine... Tilt back," cool fingers probed at the skin behind his jaw, pressing lightly upward, "Swallow," Amell hummed as she made a shorthand notation on the clipboard beside her - a chart of rows and columns filled with numbers and symbols, muttering, "regular sized nodes and salivary glands..." She cleared her throat, "For the record, " she warned as her touch descended to his neck, palpating for any irregularities, "this would be better done with a certified specialist. Healing is not my forte."

Distracted by the way he was bracketed between his office chair and her legs, it took a moment for him to realize that she was initiating a conversation. "Hmm?" He blinked, spots still dancing in his vision from her mage light that had shined onto his pupils, "If I'm not mistaken, didn't you take up that specialty when you were fighting the Blight?" His hands settled upon her hips, grip tightening when she leaned back to assess his overall coloring. He drew small circles into the dips where her thighs met her waist.

The skin underneath his thumbs jumped under his touch but she otherwise seemed unaffected to his ministrations. "Though Senior Enchanter Wynne is the best white mage in all of Ferelden and the ideal instructor, even she couldn't overcome my fundamental disinclination towards Creation and Spiritual Healing spells. Not to mention fighting Darkspawn takes up most of your time that could be put into studying and practice.

"Wouldn't that mean that you would have lots of test subjects after every skirmish?" He angled his head back to offer her a teasing smile, "Were your companions all terrified of the idea of becoming your patient?" She laughed as she sent a wave of blue cooling mana through his temples, soothing the heaviness underneath his eyes that came with the abundance of all-nighters, branching through his veins as it traveled down to his body.

"That was an initial worry. But the real issue was that in the heat of battle, I couldn't make a reliable switch from elemental to spiritual. If you were with me at that time and realized how bad the odds were - equal chance of being healed and of being blasted off the ground by a fireball - you would have been scared too." She shrugged, "A combination of my nature and reflexes, I'm afraid. At the beginning, Leliana thought that I was doing it on purpose - like burning her and Zevran's clothes off was my method of flirting."

If that was true, then Amell would have technically made advances towards half of the templars in Kinloch Hold during her time as an apprentice. Cullen wisely decided not to voice those thoughts. Instead, he closed his eyes and enjoyed her close proximity and touch, hands the pushed against his pressure points, testing nerve endings. He dimly heard the calls of morning doves from the basin.

"You're doing a fine job thus far."

"And you, dear patient, are too blase about your own health; you were a touch and go case for a long while when we first got here. Do not talk to me about fine..." Her gaze sharpened against something that rested between his collar bones. She reached out and traced the chain that disappeared beneath his shirt, slowly pulling out the necklace until the Amell pendant came to rest in her open palm. Her frown softened, she gave a heavy sigh as she leaned in until her cheek rested against his, "That's all behind us now. You're lucky that my
"Cullen. You... You kept it?" He thickly swallowed the bile that threatened to rise to his throat from her disbelief, reminding himself that during their first meeting together in Haven (and the second and third and fourth...) she had expressed similar surprise at his overtures of friendship, even though he was pretty certain that neither of them forgot his ill-thought out confession during the fall of the Ferelden Circle. "But, why?" But behind that disbelief was another emotion that peeked out that he couldn't interpret, hiding behind her eyes after she traced a finger along the engravings of the Amell pendant, her pendant that she had given him so long ago. With a heart feeling fit to burst, he turned to the windows, staring out at the hoarfrost that dotted the landscape, the songs of celebration reaching through the walls of her small cabin to his ears.

He rubbed the nape of his neck, feeling the heat of her gaze on his back, "Of course I kept it." Did she think that he would've thrown it to the depths of Lake Calenhad over their... Well. He winced at the memory... 'Heated exchange' would be putting it rather nicely. "You valued it highly. I would never demean..." The words died in his mouth as he noticed, with the reflection of the window pane, how she cautiously approached his side with the chain clenched between whitened knuckles. The mark on her palm, nearly devoid of Fade magic from sealing the Breach just hours ago, had calmed to a dull glow. "I keep it with me to remember the happier times."

Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips - he refocused his gaze above her left shoulder, hoping that she didn't catch him staring. Her room embodied organized chaos - stacks of reports placed into piles that denoted some category or another. Her mabari slept on a bed of tomes in the far corner. "If it has served you well then I don't see why you shouldn't keep it." She insisted as she pressed the necklace back into his hands and even through the gloves, he could still feel the frisson of contact - the ambient sounds of water and waves, the smell of ocean spray. "It's a gift Cullen," she lightly admonished, "You don't return gifts." Her smile was one of friendliness and warmth; her eyes still filled with that unreadable emotion. Does she feel the same way? He was sure they were friends now, at least, but does she feel... She was not the type to easily give affection but... lately, in the midst of their casual conversations, seemingly innocuous, mysterious thoughts would suddenly occur to her and she would momentarily freeze - then shake herself out of her reverie, meet his eyes, and quickly glance away, blushing, refusing to explain herself. Dare he hope?

"Are you sure? I saw you - returning this to its rightful owner... I mean, you rarely..." Stop stammering, Cullen. "Wouldn't you be happier if I gave it back?"

"I'm happy to know that you treasured it." She sat down next to him on the windowsill, smiling as she peered out the glass at the revelry of soldiers and pilgrims alike that celebrated the closing of the rift that had hovered over the Temple of Sacred Ashes. "That alone means a lot to me. Cullen, I..." There it was again - that blush that he couldn't decipher. Awkwardness that still stemmed from their reunion? Self-consciousness? But she's rarely ever embarrassed... Could he dare hope?

(Her next words were cut off by the loud blaring from the alarm of the western watchtower - patrols had spotted troops on the other side of the mountain. His hopes for a future with her had died that night, like life taken by the Void - quickly smothered, akin to the avalanche that engulfed Haven and, along with the town, her.)

Though she had picked out all the red lyrium shards from his upper back that had embedded into his
skin when a red templar behemoth swiped a claw and sent him flying into a crystal deposit in the Shrine of Dumat, she worried if even that small bit of exposure could influence his body and mind. "Maybe the lyrium knew that you were a templar," she theorized as she re-bandaged his torso, "and as soon as you touched the crystals, they tried to hold onto you." She bit off the end of the gauze, placing the remaining roll onto his desk alongside his healing potions, signed papers, and pens.

"Bianca Davri's report did hypothesize that lyrium crystals and veins carried some amount of sentience." He shivered as her fingers danced along the edges of the tape, "Lucky for us, red lyrium crystals does not act like fleas, suddenly sprouting legs and jumping onto the nearest untainted templar or ex-templar."

"What a terrifying image," she tilted her head in thought, "I'm surprised that they don't. Corruption self-propagates. Maybe Dagna could find out more with Maddox's research." She rested her forehead upon his as the sounds of soldier drills, battle cries and metal clanging against metal, trickled through the window and into his office, "That was a fun outing. You should go out more often instead of languishing behind your desk."

"Not if my work keeps exponentially growing in this manner," he gave a wry glance at the clutter on his desk and grumbled good-naturedly. He didn't regret accompanying her to the shrine - it had been a while since he had stretched his muscles and fought on a battlefield and he was happy to note that he had not grown rusty in the slightest. The expedition had yielded clues on how to exploit the weaknesses in Samson's seemly impenetrable armor was found among Maddox's burnt notes and tools. In addition, Amell found the raid therapeutic, releasing her remaining grief and aggression pertaining to Hawke's tragedy into her spells and swings - that by the time she had reached the upper walkway in Samson's camp, she was nearly back to her usual self.

"This is just like the spider incident in the Circle storeroom," she observed with an amused air as she and Cullen stood back to back, surrounded by at least four horrors and ten guardsmen. "Remember?" If the situation they found themselves in was any less dire, he would've turned to stare at her incredulously.

"What in Maker's breath are you talking about?" He gritted his teeth as he deflected a strike from a templar shadow, "This is nothing like the spider incident." He knocked a frozen marksman off-balance just as she threw a fireball at a pile of wooden crates and watched as the ensuing explosion sent a horror and three footsoldiers flying up the stairs and straight into the open arms of a surprised behemoth. "Ok," he admitted, scratching his cheek, "that was a bit like the spider incident."

His chair was slightly pushed back, pressing gently against the back of his knees. She gripped his elbows to steady him as he swayed lightly on two feet until he regained his bearings. "How are you feeling?" She prompted, carding her fingers through his hair, "No dizziness? No mind-altering effects from the red lyrium?" He shook his head, a new emotion emerging from her proximity, threatening to overtake his self-control. Hebreathed deeply: elfroot, embrium, magic... "No strange urges or desires?"

"Not strange," he turned his head to kiss the pulse against her wrist, smiling against the skin when he felt her noticeably shiver. A long pause stretched between him - he chanced glance upward. Her eyes were at half-mast, dilated pupils outlined in a sliver of grey. Outside, Inquisition soldiers ran laps around the courtyard, an uneven loop rounding the stables, the southern battlements, the barracks, and the gardens.

Her gaze flickered between his eyes and his mouth, "Normal desires, then?" She asked with a suggestive lilt on the last word and then leaned up to kiss the corner of his mouth where his facial
scar curved down. "I... I have some time to help you," she whispered, as he chased her lips, pushing her back until her thighs collided against the edge of his desk, jostling around his inkwell and pens - still they stayed standing. "If you'd like."

He bit at the soft skin underneath her jaw, "How much time?" He pressed a smile into her neck as she sharply inhaled and whined. "If-" His thumbs danced along the knots that laced over the back of her shirt, "If you can stay the night, we can watch the sunrise together." If her duties to the Inquisition and to her wardens hadn't forced her to interact with people that kept normal hours, he suspected that she would have made an effort to live a crepuscular routine if only to admire the beauty of the skies at dawn and dusk. "And before that we can... I mean, if you want..."

She caressed his neck, dragging her fingers down to the clasps of his armor as she replied, volume so low that he almost couldn't hear her, "I want whatever you want, Cullen." He stared at her as she slowly raised her head to match his gaze - surety and barely veiled desire - then reached past her and with one clean sweep of his arm, knocked everything off the table before she could change her mind. Glass potion bottles, vellum reports and summaries, pens, inkwells, and other miscellaneous items tumbled to the floor, some shattering on impact - but he barely registered the sound as he gripped her hips, lifted, and pinned her to the table. "On your desk?" she breathlessly laughed, "Is this something you've thought about oft- hnnngh."

And as he worried the skin at her collarbone with his teeth, fingers unraveling the bandages that bound her chest, traveling ever lower, her voice descended from clear articulation into incomprehensible moans. He wanted... He wanted to taste. She was laid out before him, hair splayed over the side, the ends of her hair ribbons grazing the floor - eyes repeatedly focusing and unfocusing through his ministrations. After many failed attempts to reach over and reciprocate, she gave up and instead gripped the edges, nails digging into the grooves of the wood, elemental magic of fire and ice flaring every time he kissed or touched a particularly sensitive patch of skin - the back of her neck, the dips in her collar bone, the inner wrists, the hollow of her hips, the insides of her thighs...

(Small, hitching breaths - barely heard with her face buried into his shoulder. "Maker, Cullen." She whimpered as her body arched, a small cry escaping from her lips, "Your mouth...")

And, of course, because events in Skyhold always conspired against him - just as he was about to move them upstairs to his bed, there was a knock on his door. ("On a scale of one to ten, just how frustrated are you right now?") For a few short moments, as he clenched his teeth against the wave of annoyance that flooded his body, he contemplated not answering and feigning some sickness or another that deterred visitors. But whoever was on the other side grew more insistent. Beneath him, Amell slowly roused herself back from her pleasured haze, straightening to her elbows as the light raps turned into a loud hammering, "You should get that," she murmured by his ear as she readjusted her breast band and buttoned up her front, "lest they throw your door off its hinges in their eagerness to get to you."

When he, in some semblance of haphazard professionalism, finally stalked to the door and swung it open, he had expected to see a soldier with a report or even a scout with a message. He did not expect Leliana to stare back at him, eyebrows raised, duly unimpressed by his dark scowl. "Ah, Inquisitor, I was looking for you... And Commander Cullen, " her voice steady as her eyes roamed over his less than stellar appearance, "You have a bit of red on you. Right there." His hand slapped over the skin where his neck met his shoulder, face heating up as he remembered just minutes ago, how Amell had playfully tried to wrestle control by sucking at... "Must be a bug bite."

He glared as she raised a hand to hide her smile, "What do you want?"

Her expression instantly turned grim as she leafed through her reports, finally pulling out one that
was half crumpled and tear stained. "It's Blackwall. He's gone and I think I know why."

**Blackwall**

There was a draft originating from an unseen hole on the western wall of his cell block, scented faintly of Orlesian Courser. The uneven ridges of the bench he sat on pressed unforgivingly through his clothing into his skin. Bars of reinforced silverite, painted black to match the dreary atmosphere of the cells, stood stark against the window, a view of the outside world: a beautiful day, blue skies and white clouds, where, just hours ago on the execution block, he stood and confessed his crimes. He had once assumed the identity of Gordon Blackwall. He is Thom Rainier.

"Commander Cullen is currently negotiating your release with the prison guards," Amell outlined events unseen, arms folded, hip propped up against the far wall. "It's taking longer than I had anticipated, you are highly sought after. How flattering." She had taken his confession with initial shock, anger, and resigned acceptance, all within the first few minutes of his speech, before her expression became placid once more. ("Your actions are unforgivable. But you are repenting." And that was enough for him to stay in her good graces? She saw him worthy of rescue because of his repentance? "You killed a family. You won't forget that. I won't let you forget that. The Inner Circle won't let you forget that. But yes, you are repenting.")

He grunted, dirty hands wiping at an even dirtier face - wondering how his fellow comrades in the Inner Circle must think of him now. Mockingbird, mockingbird, quiet and still, what do you see from the top of that hill? Can you see up? Can you see down? Can you see the dead things all about town? Though they had long realized that he was not a true Grey Warden and had accepted his request to keep his pseudonym - he doubted that many predicted a deception of this magnitude ...though he wouldn't put it past Iron Bull to have figured out all of his secrets within the first week of their initial meeting.

"It shouldn't be taking him this long," she muttered, tapping her feet against the floor, "If I call for the Right of Conscription, then you are instantly in my care, no exceptions - no can, ifs, or buts." Earlier in the day when they had shuffled him from cell to cell, trying to categorized what sort of criminal he was, he realized that it took him longer to respond to the name Rainier than Blackwall. Was Rainier within him? "Recruit," she laced the edges of her words with a hint of authority - his head snapped up, mind instantly cleared of previous catatonia. She examined him through the bars in a manner of a researcher studying a specimen. "What did we learn?"

Or was Thom Rainier dead? He swallowed and clasped his hands together in his lap, "The hole I dug for myself was too deep."

After a long speculative silence, she shrugged nonchalantly, "You got out of it in time," as he could only stare in disbelief at her outwardly indifferent attitude. If he hadn't known her for so long, he would've missed the speculative glances directed his way, the small crescent indents along her palm when she clenched her fists as she observed worryingly how he kept drifting into visions of the past. "You'll fit right in - Grey Wardens and greyer scruples - a moral compass that's reliant upon the friends you keep at your side." His fingers dug into his scalp, gripping the roots of his hairs, and pulled; he relished in the pain - any physical feeling that would help anchor him as the memories of that day were brought back to the forefront of his mind.

*I was slated for execution this evening. I would've waited longer, even indefinitely, if I hadn't read Sister Leliana's report on Lieutenant Cyril Mornay's conviction... I didn't stop my men as they cut through the family... The woman and children - they laughed and sang on the carpeted floor before we broke in. A red rug stylized in their family crest, stained red in their family blood. How long has it been since I last recalled the sounds of that simple game of knucklebones?*
No one stopped me. I was their captain. I could not stop myself.

"Warden Blackwall?" From the entrance of the jail, down the end of the hallway, a gruff voice called out. Footsteps echoed down the dreary hall as the new arrivals rounded the corner into view - both he and Amell took a moment to compose themselves to stoic professionalism. Commander Cullen accompanied a disgruntled prison guard, a ring of keys jangled merrily between two fingers.

Blackwall would've stopped Thom Rainier. He let loose a shaky exhale. "They're here, Blackwall," Amell murmured with a hint of a smile, as if she was parting with a little secret, "I think you'll be fine." I am Warden Blackwall. I am no one else. "Look sharp."
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

And as the black clouds came upon them,
They looked on WHAT PRIDE HAD WROUGHT,
And despaired.
The work of man and woman,
By hubris of their making.
The sorrow a blight unbearable.
—Canticle of Threnodies 7:10-11

Cole

"It is in the nature of demons to be contrary to their original purpose. That conflict is not peaceful," Cole accepts a glass of Vint-0 Rowan's Rose, fingers pinching at the neck. (Delicate to the nose, comfort to the tongue, and, strangely, a half-remembered whisper to the ears. It is described as - and inspires - a wistful spirit. A vintner's opus.) Though he neither eats nor drinks, he appreciates the thought that went into the gesture, "Demons are spirits with unhappy selves." The blue skies above Val Royeaux slowly pinken as the sun slowly descend into the landscape where harbor waters met the mountains. The ambient sounds of the fountain and the low conversations of customers drift like the mental voices that too often pass over him, just within his reach if he feels the need to investigate further, brushing playfully against his mind.

The Inquisitor graces us with her presence! Will Madame Bolivar talk to me if I compliment her on her red hat? Today's fishing prospects do not look promising - the storm last week had pushed many schools of the mackerel to the shores of Amaranthine...

"You're pretty happy, Cole," She observes as she swirls her own glass, closes her eyes, breaths in, and sips. Honeysuckle. Butterscotch. Velvet palate. Intriguing character. She then watches him with fond amusement as he attempts to mimic her and ends up dribbling his own mouthful down his chin, sputtering, and hands him a handkerchief, "Gently. You have to let the taste settle on your tongue."
The heady scent of aged grapes from the vineyards north of Valence burns through his sinuses. He dimly registers the hint of oak barrels lying under an unrelenting sun, waiting patiently for days and weeks and months and years, as the wine matures. The waiter turns in their direction at the commotion Cole brought about, brown eyes curiously gazing through a sequined, beaked mask. The waiter turns away but does not forget. Sneezing delicately into the square fabric, Cole leans back and closes his eyes.

He remembers a templar that was not dressed as a templar standing by a watchtower, awaiting illegal shipments of lyrium. That templar was alive and well, going about his life like his past actions had resulted in the death of an innocent. The templar forgot about Cole, just like he had forgotten about Cole... Him... Varric's crossbow, Bianca, insistently called for his touch - his index finger fluttered against her trigger. The bolt, strung tightly in front of a pulled taught string, waited eagerly for a heart - or for the space above the templar's right shoulder. Cole wanted the man to pay and yet he could not... "I am a spirit with a self, but self implies... Human." Solas once said that the spirits that were forced across the Veil lacked the amount of will to endure the realities of this realm. Cole looks up as he hesitantly ventured a question, "You said that this world is not just good or bad. You said that
there are choices. How do I make them?"

She blinks in consternation, "Aren't your choices dependent on your original purpose?" Amell asked as she folded her hands into her lap. **Deciding which path to take at the crossroads should be easier for a spirit than a human.** "Your purpose was inherent in you. But for others, we have to choose our purpose and that comes easier to some more than others." **No one could've guessed that I would've joined the Grey Wardens back in the Circle. I was the apprentice with an affinity for elemental spells and not much else. I was the apprentice with the aspirations to become a battlemage despite my performance telling me otherwise.** "Sometimes the results that come aren't what you anticipated. Was it better or worse than your original goal?" **We changed you. Do... Do you regret?**

Cole wants to tell her that regret surrounded everything she had ever fixed and that she shouldn't view it as a negative emotion in that context. Regret can be motivation if honed properly. Regret drove the Orlesian wardens proactively to Weisshaupt. Regret drove the mages into thinking of alternative methods of bettering their life - resisting the siren song of violence. **"Isn't it easier if we just... Kill them?"** So many people had asked. Kill the templars - said the mages. Kill the mages - said the templars. Kill the enemies of the Inquisition - said Leliana. Cole himself favors a swift death over life-long imprisonment and suffering. But the Inquisitor had changed so many minds - and eventually, even Sister Nightingale learns. **There are other ways. Do not loose hope.**

Her plate comes - he smells fillet mignon, thyme, and freshly crushed pepper. Buttered asparagus lines the borders of the pristine plate. "I had regrets even as a spirit. Not full, all-encompassing human-regrets - spirit-like regrets," Cole's hands fiddles with the table cloth, nails picking at the holes in the lace border, "When I first found Cole and became Cole, I... I didn't know what I was. I had one friend. But as I grew, as I learned, I lost that friend and I... I regretted then but not as much... It wasn't realized, it was..." He cuts off his long-winded diatribe ("Thank you," Cole had said before he died, mouth parched - his only source of water being the droplets that condensed on the moss of his prison cell every morning - body weak from a lack of food - weeks upon weeks of slow hunger, gnawing... Crying... And all Compassion could do was hold his hand) and chuckles.

Silverware taps against fine china. She chews slowly and swallows. Soft. It melts like butter between her teeth. "Are you laughing at your own naivety?"

He nods and shuffles a bit in his chair, "Yes," he sighs as he tugs down the brim of his wide hat, "I lingered at the in-between because I lost Rhys - because changes in me reflects changes around me and making choices hurt. But," He pulls out a dagger and pressed it gently against the pad of his thumb and watches, entranced, as a bead of red slowly rose from his shallow cut. "But I realize now that as I learn, as I decide between left or right, I can keep my friends; I don't have to loose them. You showed me that."

**That's not right. Did he believe this in Skyhold?** "But you didn't change. You're still Cole." ...She's right. He is still Cole. He still helps. Whenever the opportunity allows, he still slips into her unguarded room and places a bottle of honey mead, a large piece of chocolate, and a chipped Ferelden toy soldier on her work desk next to her correspondence with her men and women at Soldier's Peak. Her response was always the same - **Exasperated gratefulness. Thank you, Cole. You really didn't have to.** (In her darkest moments, she is convinced that all she touches will break. But that's not true. She is a fixer. He needs to remind her of that through simple gestures.)

Cole points at the waiter standing at the podium that had handed them their menus, currently engaging another group of patrons in small talk. "That woman wants to leave her mother and seek her fortune in Nevarra. She already made plans with a scholar in a border town who had agreed to an apprenticeship. That man wants to do dirty things to his wife. Silk strings looped around his wrist, tied to the bedposts. He's afraid to ask - he doesn't know that she'll laugh but say yes. I know these
things but I can't... I can't tell him." He taps his temple with a finger, "Something is stopping me." His powers are sometimes interrupted by a gentle prickle just as he prepares to help.

"Conscience?" she speculated, humming through another succulent bite.

He shrugged, "A conscience for simple things? Actions based upon familiarity. Social graces. Becoming human?" He blinks from underneath his hat as she chews on her lower lip in thought and tilts his head to the side in thought, "That something doesn't stop for you... It took him so long to read your language of passion - eyes, mouth, touch, companionship through time. Your love is far subtler than his that burns unquenchable within his heart. He treasures the moments you unravel before him. And..." Cole waits for her teeth to release her bruised lips (glistening red) to take another sip of wine, "He stares at your mouth when you do that." She chokes.

"You've been," she coughs and attempts to swallow, fist thumping against her chest, "hanging out with Varric for far too long." Cole reaches for his own glass and swirls clockwise as he muses on the choice of Solas or Varric. If he didn't have Varric teaching him knock-knock jokes, then he would have had Solas teaching him ways to search for alternate realities through the Veil. But he had chosen Varric and only time will tell - if he regrets. "Your conscience doesn't stop you because I'm a friend." His tongue delicately laps at the surface of the wine - he is more prepared this time: bitter, wood, smoke. **Andraste's flaming sword - he's like a cat.**

"Friend," he says, testing the word on his tongue. It tastes sweet. "New friends. Friends that would stay. You..." He leans across the table and grabs her hand, suddenly overcome by a tightness in his throat, struggling to speak, "He walks into the darkness over and over: a body of a young boy, a soul of a younger spirit. She worries. Thank you."

"We're all here for you," she squeezes back.

He ducks his head, feeling warmth travel from his face to his neck down to his chest, "I know and I'm here for all of you." He smiles, "I might like being human. What do you think I'll learn next?"

**Josephine**

Antivan ports smelled of week old halibut, cod, and salmon, baked dry in the hot sun and preserved with a special mixture of spices that were rubbed into the skin. In contrast, the smell around Orlesian ports were more floral from the lavish gardens kept on the terraces and balconies of nearby mansions. Orlesian fishermen tended to keep their daily catches alive in transportable water tanks, only killing them at the last possible moment on the cutting board. Though Josephine felt the faint stab of homesickness welling up in her chest, she consoled herself with the fact that though duties to the Inquisition kept her from returning to her family's side, she can now grant them safe passage to the shores of the Waking Sea for trade and visit. On her right, the Inquisitor... Amell - Josephine mentally corrected herself - adjusted the straps of her satchel, summarizing her success at Marquis Wiscotte's fete, "Minister Bellise will one day contact you for assistance," she pensively frowned, "If you feel like her harassment exceeds the favor that the Inquisition owes her, do not hesitate to tell Leliana."

Whatever service Minister Bellise will eventually concoct - establishing alliances, a meeting with the Council, perhaps even a meeting with the Emperor - would be considered a mere hindrance compared to the stress that she had experienced from the members of the House of Repose. "You've seen me handle the demands of nobles, Inquisitor. It is easy for me to attend to the Minister's needs."

"I won't doubt you, not with that much confidence backing your word." Amell was barely heard over the sounds of the ship bells docking on arrival, "You look so much more relaxed. No assassination attempts today? No one I need to punt out your window onto our field of Avvar goats?
The last man nearly got eaten alive.” Little known fact: the purpose of all things Avvar was war - even their livestock was bred for battle from horses to nugs and goats to chickens. Yes: even an Avvar chicken was a terrifying opponent to behold.

Resisting the urge to massage her temples as she recalled that particular memory, Josephine shook her head and unfolded the missive that she had held in her hands, "A servant from the Du Paraquettes found me today - they finished their side of the bargain. I do not have to worry anymore." Her first read-through was a mere skim, her heart beating too loudly and her grip too shaky for her to catch anymore than selective phrases. To Lady Josephine Cherette Montilyet. As the head of the Du Paraquettes, I offer my felicitations and... contract hereby declared null and void, signed under the rise of the noble... May we meet again under better circumstances... But it was enough - the weight that rested on her shoulders for so long that she had gotten used to was lifted. She was free.

Amell's fingers glowed a soft blue, tendrils of light slowly extending to the bottom of her satchel, "If I were you, I would've kept the contract alive just to relieve my boredom from everyday mundane activities." She pouted as Josephine rolled her eyes, "Imagine. Whenever I need a break from paperwork, muscles aching from the hours of bending over my escritoire, I could stretch, walk around, and fight some assassins" spoken in a casual tone as if fending off assassins was akin to a harmless hobby like embroidery or playing a musical instrument. "Leliana would say the same."

It was times like these that Josephine speculated on the surely unusual life this woman had lived - what had she faced in her younger years that twisted her notion of normal in a way that a reward for her head was seen as something exciting and fun. "Leliana relieves boredom by searching for unsuspecting victims to terrify." Amell giggled into her bandaged hand, turning around so that her back and elbows rested against the fence that separated the boardwalk from the crystal waters. The sun framed her outline in an effused glow, tinting her hair dark blue.

A man wearing a sequenced mask of a family retainer passed by their position with a bucket of fresh oysters submerged in salt water, a black cormorant dogging his heels. Amell's eyes follow him until he disappears around the corner to the merchant circle with a hint of longing.

I have just finished reading your latest letter. Clarel's actions and death dealt a harsh blow on the Warden's ability to remain in the southern countries of Thedas. The news of Adamant brought about a feeling of loss and of hope.

You are blessed with a talented leader. As the weeks and months go by and our common enemy grows weaker with every blow the Inquisition strikes upon him, I wonder whether, when all this is said and done, she will return to Soldier's Peak as a leader to us or to you. With that said, we have long prepared for contingency plans should she choose to stay with the Inquisition. It is not too ridiculous of a notion since most of her time as Warden-Commander was spent outside of her own arling. As a result, most of the bureaucratic work had fallen into my hands while she scouted and lead expeditions for information, connections, equipment, and the likes. I hope that she will make the occasional visit to her old friends - letters can only convey so much feeling.

Rest assured that we, the Ferelden Wardens, are not petty or angered by a possible loss of our highly esteemed leader. Much. To show our goodwill and acceptance of these events, we have enclosed a catalog detailing Warden-Commander Amell's mental, emotional, and physical care. Please make sure that she is neither too confined nor too

Raw oysters are a common dish in Amaranthine... Josephine wondered if Amell, too, was homesick and dimly recalled a letter she had received not long ago stamped with the red wax seal of dual griffons and a shield.
extended in her duties as an Inquisitor.

~ Best wishes, Warden-Constable of Ferelden Nathaniel Howe and Co.

On the back of the vellum scroll was a list of her favorite foods, games, novels - on and on - some inane and some insightful - down to her favorite crafting material (Nevarrite: for its shaded luster). Josephine had stared at the letter for a good two minutes, trying to decide whether the Inquisition was being led by a Warden-Commander or a beloved mabari and whether the man writing to her was a Warden-Constable Second-in-Command or a fretting parent. In the end, she decided to hand the note off to Cullen, who, at the time, was in the happiest state she had ever seen - love in his gaze, an involuntary smile curling his lips whenever he loses himself in his reports. Leliana later told her with a suggestive waggle in her brows that his courtship to Amell had finally ended on a satisfactory note.

"Leliana would put the fear of the Maker and Andraste herself into her victims," Josephine continued, clasping her hands in front of her skirt, "but after you returned with her from the Valence Cloister, I think she's more inclined to give those victims another chance instead of..." Josephine abhorred killing - the only reason she had tried the Bardic Arts in her earlier years was because of how the Game had skillfully placed a shroud of romanticism over the actual act of taking a life, of sinking a dagger though the ribs, of slitting a throat, of watching life fade with the last gasping breath. Josephine had despaired that her friend would never shrug off the title of the feared Sister Nightingale (beware the woman whose footsteps are coated in the blood of her enemies), Left Hand of the Divine and yet... Sister Natalie had surrendered herself to the Inquisition in good health: shaken but alive. "There's a softness about her. I see more of the old Leliana."

Her last sentence brought about another round of laughter and mirth. Amell pressed a finger to her lips, "Shh,' she playfully murmured, "take care not to use that word in front of our mutual friend. Especially after last week..." A pair of albatrosses crossed overhead, "Old. Who knew Leliana would be this tetchy about her age?"

"Wait," Cullen raised his head and stared at the Spymaster, an expression on his face that reminded Josephine of that one occurrence when he had whimsically made the observation that Lake Calenhad looked like a rabbit, hands resting on the world map, just above the western border of the Hissing Wastes, "Did you just say you remember the Ferelden Rebellion? How old did you say you were?"

Suddenly, the temperature of the war room dropped below the outside temperature of the Frostback Mountains. This was no ordinary windchill. Josephine shivered, rubbing her arms through her sleeves. Standing in the shadows behind the Spymaster, Amell made frantic cutting motions at the her neck in a bid to silence the man. "I never said how old I was," Leliana replied after an agonizing pause, folding her arms and tilting her head. "How old do you think I am?"

Dryly swallowing, Cullen turned towards Josephine and Amell, silently asking for an answer that wouldn't get him castrated. Josephine quickly hid her face behind her clipboard, suddenly engrossed in Marquis DuRellion's requisition to rebuild the village of Haven. Regarding Leliana's age, Josephine could only guess at the exact number - but now that she thought about it, her dear friend did not seem to have aged at all, no new smile lines or crows feet on her mien, since their first encounter at the University of Orlais. Perhaps in her travels, she had sought and found a mystical fountain of youth - wasn't that the rumors traveling among her scouts? Out of the corner of her eye, Josephine saw Amell raise her hands up in surrender.

One of Cullen's more endearing personality traits was that he was stubborn - it went
hand in hand with his inability to know when to stop prodding. His brow furrowed as he made the mental calculations, looking increasingly puzzled as he tried to equate the number in his head with the smoothness of Leliana's features, "The Ferelden Rebellion finished in 9:2 Dragon," he said carefully, as if slowly edging towards a cornered asp, "That would make you at least fort-

A small penknife suddenly appeared, buried to the hilt in the space between his index and middle finger. He quickly jerked back, wringing his offending hand as Josephine palmed her face and Amell gave a low whistle of appreciation. "I would not finish that word, Commander," Leliana offered a smile that had Cullen abruptly blanch in fear. "It is in poor taste to ask a lady her age."

The old Leliana. The Leliana that could spend hours window shopping the markets in Val Royeaux for that perfect pair of shoes. The Leliana who had commissioned most of Josephine's clothes from the most notable tailors and cultivated her sense of fashion. The Leliana who thought that Schmooples was a perfectly acceptable name for a pet nug. The Leliana who embodied the dichotomy between world weariness and happy innocence.

"Niceness not knives," Amell chirped as she held her satchel close to her, sidestepping a few determined seagulls that were beginning to curiously peck at her bag.

Shooing away the pests, Josephine gave her companion an unimpressed look, "Leliana was mocking me, wasn't she?" Amell shrugged. The bells of the west clocktower rang for the arrival of dusk. Clearing her throat, Josephine placed a hand on her shoulder, "Regardless. I'm glad you came to us all those months ago in Haven. You've changed us, all of us, for the better," herself, Leliana, Cullen, and all the members of the Inquisition. "If you have any time in the near future, you should visit Antiva - as the heir apparent to the Montilyet family, I speak on the behalf of my house to say that we'll welcome you with open arms-" her invitation was interrupted by a gull's second attempt to reach the satchel that was beginning dampen at the bottom. Amell squeaked in surprise as she darted to Josephine's other side, using her as a makeshift shield against the increasing flock of sea birds: terns, gulls, cormorants... "Amell?" she muttered in a hushed voice, subtly eyeing the distance between their vulnerable position and the nearest building, "What do you have with you that is attracting these creatures?"

Josephine could practically feel the chagrin emanating form the other woman's body, "Uhh... I didn't know that they would be attracted to it. I thought that they only eat fish..." Amell untied the top flap of her bag, reached in, and pulled out a strange object encased in melting ice. Josephine's brows rose above her hairline - Was that a...

"The heart of a snowy wyvern," Amell helplessly shrugged as she batte away a gull that swooped low over their heads, "I... It was Vivienne who had asked for a favor and... Actually, please don't ask." One bird among the growing army gave a loud cry of hunger: the rest echoed the original's sentiment, "We should probably run."

Amell

She tested her quill tip on a piece of scrap, frowning when the ink spilled out of the nib as a large, unseemly blot, "Blast it," she cursed as she flung the quill into the fire and rummaged through her satchel, "My last one too... Of course Enchanter Cera wouldn't listen to a lowly apprentice's requisition for better pens." She ran an agitated hand through her hair, "Or maybe it's because she favors elves. After all, she gave Alim a lightning rod. Only an idiot would offer Apprentice Alim 'I once conducted electricity through rubber' Surana a Maker-damned lightning ro-" Someone lightly coughed behind her and tapped her shoulder with a biro, "Oh. Thank you," she rubbed her temples and turned in her chair, "I'll forgive you this time for being late but the next time you ask for
my help in your Formari craft work, don't expect..." A steel gauntlet? Amell blinked and craned her neck back, "You are not Jowan."

Ser Cullen's visage was eclipsed by the light from the doorway that connected the library to the winding stairs. "Ame... Well met, Apprentice Amell." Accepting the proffered pen and twirling it between her fingers, she noted with faint humor and guilt that he still bore his... one-of-a-kind goatee that he had been trying to cultivate for the past two months... most likely encouraged by her white-lie.

("D-do you like it?" He had asked her when she had passed him in the hallways on her way to class, rubbing his chin as if not at all familiar with the texture of his own facial hair. She had chewed on her lower lip trying to decide what to say - to say no would be akin to kicking a cute puppy but to say yes... "Uh..." Everyone in the Circle, mage and templar, save for him, thought it was pretty hideous. "Sure. You..." she had desperately fished for an honest answer that would not insult his sensibilities, "it makes you stand out.")

"Did the Knight-Captain assigned you to library patrols again?" she asked as he began to fidget, "Sit," shoving some of her bulkier tomes on the classification of Fade demons to the side, she pointed across her table at the cushioned chair that had been originally reserved for Jowan. Where was he? ...Now that she thought about it; Jowan lately had been absent from her side more often than not. Hadn't Anders hinted once that he was sneaking off nightly to meet with a paramour? "Sit, Cullen. I'm the only one here at this hour," she repeated with a touch of fond exasperation as the man stared at the chair as if it had suddenly grown fangs, "Isn't a table preferred over a wall? From here, you'll still have a clear view of me and the door."

"Well..." After another few seconds of indecisive loitering, he slowly pulled the seat back, the sounds of wooden legs dragging along the stone floor echoing in the chamber, "I do need to finish my letter to Mia," he mumbled as he pulled out two crumpled pieces of vellum from within his breastplate and smoothed it out. "She admonished me in her last letter for not writing to her often enough and... Here..." Amell extended a hand; he handed the parchment over, "She also asked after your health."

"-of my idiotic brother. Though from his stories, it seems to be him who is taking care of your idiotic, fire-happy self. Do you both wander around the Circle being idiots together? Sometimes, I wonder what goes on in your mind-..." Was Mia referring to the incident last week when she had finally managed to circle a Glyph of Repulsion with grease fire and tried to test the spell combination's effectiveness by throwing paper airplanes toward the inscribed rune? "Send her my regards. As for health," Amell trailed off, fingers drumming against the leather binding of her books, grimacing as she popped a few stiff joints in her neck and shoulders, "Tell her that I am fine."

Her answer was met with a minute of skeptical and worried silence. She shrunk back into her chair, inwardly berating herself for using such a bald-faced lie. He lifted an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced, "You are definitely not fine. It was obvious that you were troubled during the evening meal and even now, you're stressed. What's wrong?" He tapped the letter, "You know as well as I that Mia can smell lies through ink."

Huffing a laugh, she closed her eyes, index finger and thumb kneading her nose bridge. "Of course you would notice," she shifted uneasily in her chair, "Earlier today, I had a meeting with Senior Enchanter Leorah about warrior-like melee weaponry. While she
had gone to search through her study for a tome about Arcane Warriors, I saw on her
desk a transcript of a meeting a fortnight ago about me. Irving thinks I'm ready. I mean, I
knew that I would be the first of my age group to undergo... - but I thought they would
wait another two years at least. I would be the youngest ever by a month and how do
they expect from me this element of-" His templar aura flared in alarm. She realized that
in her distress, her magic had lowered the ambient temperature of the library - the once
roaring fireplace now a pile of sputtering embers, "Sorry," she whispered, cheeks
heating up as she hurriedly regained control of her mana.

He smiled reassuringly at her, "Your Harrowing?" She wordlessly nodded as she
summoned mage light into her palm and hovered it above their table. "Do you - Do you
want to talk about it?" She morosely shrugged as she reached for a nearby book, staring
at the title as the words started to rearrange themselves. Primal, Entropy, Creation,
Spirit, Demons, Demons, Demons... He reached over the table to clamp his fingers
around her twitching wrists. "Calm down. Did you read the entire note? Did you see
what date they assigned to you?"

"Blood Moon," she murmured, "That's three and a half months from now. It's why I'm
trying to..." With her hands still trapped within his, she motioned with a jerk of her head,
encompassing all of the books that littered the table: The Nature of Pride Demons and
Lightning Affinities, Rage and Wraith - Similarities and Differences, Tranquility and
Ethics: What It Means to be Human, The Non-Existent Map of the Fade... "It's also
partly the reason why I'm here - I accidentally let slip to Godwin an hour ago and I'm
pretty sure that by now everyone knows. If I go back to my quarters, they will-" Her
eyes widened imperceptibly and she ducked her head as her face reddened.

He tilted his head in confusion, "They will what?"

"...throw a party." Not quite the truth. Yes, the night usually started with revelries - but
into the later hours, the festivities would often turn into a strange mixture of mourning,
farewell, and debauchery. In some instances, the would-be-Harrowed apprentice would
find a... companion for the night. Jowan had told her that the tradition started from the
belief that Tranquils felt things differently including intimacy and some mages wanted to
feel like an adult before they feel nothing. There was no way she was ever going to tell
Cullen this. Dear Maker. He would blush and stutter, then she would feel embarrassed
for him and accidentally set something on fire, then he would stand up and overturn the
desk in his haste to nullify the flames, then she would... Either way, it would be a
positive feedback loop of humiliation until both of them wished that the floor would
swallow them up whole. ...Not the first time such a thing has happened.

"A celebration would take your mind off of the unpleasantry," he cajoled, "You can rely
on m- on your support base of friends between now and then."

Jowan, the hapless, childhood best friend? A veritable foundation on which she could
rest her hardships? If only. Anders, the runaway mage? He spent so much of these
recent years on the run or in his cell that their friendship had long deteriorated. Cullen,
the templar? Then again, he was the only one here... "A party would make it feel more
real. I would like to be in denial for a while longer," she squirmed restlessly in her seat,
his grip on her hands the only thing preventing her from pacing the length of the library,
"I shouldn't feel fear," frustration welled within her, her hands clenched into tight fists,
"Irving always said that he had the utmost faith in me to excel. My abilities are adequate.
...But there's always that chance of possession or death. And what if I get-"
"You'll do well," he gently interrupted her, "It's not just the First Enchanter, I-I believe in you too." He offered a crooked smile, "I've seen you at the practicals. It's only when you actually concentrate and try instead of stepping out into the field of spell experimentation, that you show others why senior enchanters consider you years ahead of your peers. I wouldn't anticipate any problems from your Harrowing."

"You say that because you're my minder... Thank you," she pulled away, carding her fingers through her hair, pleased yet uncomfortable by his compliments. "So," she cleared her throat, fiddling with the pen that he had given to her, "in that off-chance that possession becomes-

"It won't happen," he interrupted her.

"Still," she persisted, drawing her legs up to her chest, resting her arms upon them to create a pillow for her chin, "We can't let them take me." She peered over her knees: hands clenched on the desk, curly hair, amber eyes, an atrocious goatee. Not just a templar: also a friend.

"You'll keep watch? Not just then. After too."

In the dim brightness offered by a dying fire and a floating mage light, she watched his adam's apple dip as he swallowed. "Always." His promise was steady, holding volume and weight in its importance - that was all the reassurance she needed.

The sun reminded her of the blood orange that Sera had once stolen from the fruit bowl in the Skyhold kitchens, stretching the shadows of pine trees down the hill. Below her was the abandoned village of Honnleath, thatched and shingled roofs still standing on structurally sound foundations. The darkspawn had chased its inhabitants north and east, so devoted they were in spreading the Taint that they had left entire buildings intact. It looked, from a distance, for all intents and purposes, to be a quiet village, so long as nobody noticed the absence of smoke from chimneys. Noting the distinct lack of pigeons in the area, she wondered where Shale had disappeared to after Wynne's funeral. A hand wrapping around her arm broke her free from her reverie. "Not that way," Cullen murmured into her ear, steering her to the meadows that lied south of the main road.

"We're not...?" She glanced back questioningly, "I thought... Then where are we going?"

"I want to show you something else. Its an ideal place to rest at this time of the year." Spring blossoms tilted their petals towards the setting sun, effused in the ethereal glow of crepuscular rays - lavender, mint, embrium... He flashed her a boyish grin, nervous anticipation apparent in every step he took, voice hushed as they dipped below the treeline into the shade, "I had imagined a moment akin to this."

"Convening with the nature around your hometown?" she inquired as she lightly hopped from rock to rock, boots sinking into a bed of lichen that grew by the riverbed.

"Showing you to my family. Have you finally meet Mia face to face. Maybe regret my decision later - you two would get along too well." Amell laughed, hooking her arm around his elbow. "I thought I could ask you after your Harrowing and get permission from Knight-Commander Greagoir on the basis of 'familiarizing a new battlemage with the common people.' Do you think he would've said yes?" She shrugged: the Knight-Commander, though mildly terrifying, was fair in his rule and not unreasonable - still, to encourage that sort of liaison... Then again, Leliana had confirmed the rumor that he had a child with Wynne - so maybe he would've been sympathetic? "Never mind that. What I want to know is this - do you think you would've said yes? At that time, you had no idea about my feelings regarding you. Would you have thought my offer too strange?"

She tried to imagine Cullen, ten years younger, stuttering through his invitation, and how she
would've responded. "I would've said yes, albeit I would've thought that visiting your family was a puzzling detour to put on the itinerary since you were a stickler for the rules." She would not have turned down an offer to tour the world outside the walls of Kinloch Hold. It would have been a grand field trip - what sort of shenanigans would they have gotten themselves into? Would the Blight still have interrupted their plans? "If it makes you feel any better, I wasn't trying to belittle your feelings. I didn't know."

He heaved a sigh as they approached a fork in the road, "I was well aware."

"Do you ever think that a mage and a templar could ever, well, truly lo-love one another?" He asked her ten moves into their chess game as their spot in the corner of the library drew increasingly odd and knowing looks from apprentices, enchanters, and his fellow guardsman. His sudden question released her from her deep contemplation of her next move her decision between freeing her knight from its corner position in the board or taking his rook with her pawn.

"Scandalous thoughts there, Ser Cullen. What if someone besides me overheard-" Prodding her bishop to intercept an attack from his pawn, she glanced up, "Oh, you're serious about this..." Chewing on her lower lip, she considered the question with uncharacteristic gravity, "It's not impossible. The tension between Wynne and Greagoir could be cut with a butter knife." She leaned over, elbows against the table, wooden edge digging into her stomach, whispering with a mischievous glint in her eyes, "They obviously had a salacious history before it turned sour. Now Greagoir spends all of his time with Irving beside the closed doors of his office doing whatever hobbies old men do," she wiggled her eyebrows and fingers suggestively. "Chess?"

He folded his arms and ruefully shook his head, "Only you think that there's something happening between Irving and Greagoir. They're just friends."

She hummed, pouting as he checked her king, "It's love of a friend, of an equal. That sort of emotion, I think, is not too different - a mere fine line apart - from the sexual love between intimate couples, in certain circumstances. They continued their game in silence until he checked her again. "To answer your question: yes, a mage and a templar can love one another in all sort of ways. The forbidden aspect of the affair might make it more desirable to some and distasteful to others." Cullen slowly turned red under her scrutiny. He didn't look like the type who would break the rules for something like mere infatuation. "You're not a terrible person," she finally decided as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a bit flattered that he would trust her as his confidant, "It's hard to imagine anyone saying no."

He stared blankly at her in response, "You-You. I... What?"

She glanced around, glaring at any eavesdroppers that dared to venture near their conversation bubble, "Have some faith in yourself," she whispered encouragingly as she prodded her bishop to the far vacant black square, in line with his queen. Cullen was one of the better looking men in Kinloch Hold, a templar who deliberately goes out of his way in his acts of kindnesses to accommodate his mage charges - beautiful on both the inside and outside. "Any girl will be lucky to have you - you just need some confidence in yourself." Maybe this would be the time to tell him that his chances would increase if he shaved off the goatee... Instead, she offered a winning smile and patted him on his gloves, "You'll get there one day."

"One day..." He echoed, dragging a hand through his curls. His queen captured her
rook. He tipped her king over. They silently watched it roll to the edge of the board and off the edge of the table. "Checkmate."

She could see her own reflection in the pond between the pond reeds and rushes that swayed in the gentle wind, creating ripples that distorted the image of her swinging her legs back and forth. She looked down at the silver coin that sat in her hand. She tested its weight: light in physicality, heavy in importance, rubbing her thumb along the groove that had been formed by its previous owner. "It was the only thing I kept with me from before my initiation into the Order, serving me in many ways: a reminder, a stable footing, a token of luck, a memory of happier times." He had pressed it into her hands, gazing imploringly into her eyes, "I want you to have it. Let it be a promise from me to you."

The wind whispered the story of a boy born from humble beginnings, innocent in the ways of the world, who wanted to be a templar and received so much more. The lily pads drifted aimlessly in little circles. The pier planks creaked ominously below her weight but she trusted them to hold her, just as he did. The sun finally disappeared over the horizon, encasing the skies in increasingly darker shades of purple and indigo. Every time she blinked, she could imagine herself being taken away from the responsibilities of the world - Inquisitor, Herald, Commander, to name a few. This place... His sanctuary... It's nice. She softly hummed a song, shivering as the evening chill grazed her bare arms. Why did he take her here? Was he still unsure? Did she show him her own...?

Cullen stirred from his short doze. "Amell?" He had an arm thrown carelessly around her waist, head resting against the back of her left shoulder. "You're thinking too hard." She twisted her neck around, blinking when he leaned forward to peck her cheek.

"You do know I love you?" she blurted out, clutching his gift against her chest, "You don't have to give me this if you thought that it would engender emotions that already exist - I already felt in Halamshiral towards you a..." She guiltily flushed, face burying into the crook of his neck, "Did I ever tell you that?"

"You didn't have to. I knew," he murmured as he pulled her into his lap, yawning into her nape, "and I still think you should keep it safe for me."

"It's been with you since childhood," she weakly protested, trying to concentrate at the conversation at hand as he bit at the skin below her jaw, "It's invaluable."

"My token would be more invaluable as a vow. Why do you worry about its worth? I remember someone who once gave me a gift that they had kept with them since her mother had dropped her off at Kinloch Hold and asked me to accept it." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Amell pendant, hooking the thin chain around his thumb - dual birds in stylized geometric, sharp lines. "Keep it with you," he entreated as he switched between gentle and demanding kisses - his touch was distracting, deliberately so, "As long as I have your pendant and you have my token..." He grinned as her fingers buried into his pauldron and started tugging him closer, "Is that a yes?"

She tucked the silver coin away into the folds of her clothes, "Insatiable," she half-heartedly grumbled, growing limp under his ministrations. "It is."

He huffed a laugh as he wrapped his arms around her in a warm hug, "Thank you."
Chapter Summary

And as the black clouds came upon them,
They looked on WHAT PRIDE HAD WROUGHT,
And despaired.
The work of man and woman,
By hubris of their making.
The sorrow a blight unbearable.
—Canticle of Threnodies 7:10-11

Cullen

The free edges of the thin metal sheet were rough and uneven as if hastily cut by cheap shears. The folded edges were crisp and tight - a triangular head, a pair of flat wings, a pointed tail. He wondered whether Maddox used his hands, tools, or magic to fold his cranes - perhaps a combination of all three. Cullen set the sculpture back onto the corner of his desk and thought about Samson, a once treasured friend, now Corypheus's most trusted lieutenant. What would the Inquisition do when they finally capture him (not 'if' anymore, the organization had grown into its own power, giving rise to a future that is bathed in the surety of 'when')? Hand him over to Kirkwall? Imprisonment? Arcanist Dagna had been strongly hinting at her interests in studying the ex-templar.

"There's no one else in Thedas that is so in sync with their red lyrium injections," Dagna protested, research notes and papers flying about her as she waved her arms, "Just think. Up until recently, everyone thought that lyrium was a mineral. What does it mean when it isn't - that its organic and alive?" She empathetically pointed at an empty lyrium bottle on his shelf, one of the few momentos he had allowed himself to keep after he had left the Order and overcame his withdrawal symptoms. "What were the mages and templars drinking? We have no idea!"

"I'll let you take apart his armor once we retrieve it. Nothing more," he retorted flatly; Dagna pouted and turned towards Amell, silently pleading for assistance. Amell shrugged apologetically: Cullen could not tell whether the gesture was directed towards him or her.

"He has first claim, Dagna" she bent down to pick up the scattered papers, "If he says no, it really means no." Cullen felt the tension within his shoulders loosen as she shifted from a previous neutral stance to his side. Dagna, for all her outwardly innocent exuberance, was an avid researcher and not one to be underestimated, especially if someone decided to step in between herself and what she labeled as 'the facts.' If Samson was left in the dwarf's not-at-all merciful clutches, he would be immediately towed to the Undercroft and never be seen again. No one, not even Samson, deserved to undergo whatever experiments Dagna would think of for a living specimen.

Before the Elder One, before Meredith's madness, Raleigh Samson was a decent man. Albeit addicted to lyrium, he never using his dependence as a crutch on his morals, never lowered himself to base actions in order to get a dose even when he had developed the shakes during his latter days as a beggar in Lowtown. He was a Kirkwall templar who was genuinely protective of his mage charges to the point that he would defend them against his fellow guardsmen and women. It wasn't until much later that Cullen realized why Samson fought against the Knight-Commander's policies and
that was only after the red lyrium statue stood at the center of the entrance to the Gallows, flanked by statues of gate guardians and slaves. Before then, neither seeing the lack of paper cranes lying on the windowsill of their shared room nor seeing the symbol of Tranquility upon Mage Maddox's forehead had summon within Cullen any sympathy for Samson's plight.

They would now. By the Maker - they would now. The inscribed tranquility symbol in particular induces a paralyzing terror within him: what if? "I brought back the lyrium growths from Carroll's body for you. Do you have any idea how hard it is to haul cargo through the Emerald Graves?" exasperated, Amell smacked her forehead as Dagna continued to cajole and beg, "This is the thanks I get? Dagna, Dagna, Dagna... I have half in mind to just-" Cullen watched as their argument descended into childish squabbles and play fight, pinching cheeks and poking ribs. If Amell became Tranquil, there would not be the underlying affection that accompanied her easy-going laugh and teasing. If Amell was Tranquil, she would be incapable of love. If Amell was Tranquil in Kirkwall... Hawke had told him of Alrik's intentions - the implications of the perversions within the Gallows didn't occur to him until he had left the Order. ("Ser Otto Alrik said it wasn't rape if they didn't fight back.") She would be a doll: an expressionless face, dead eyes, pliant...

Cullen swallowed the lump in his throat, averting his gaze from their merry scuffle and turning his attention onto the notes he had made for the Inquisition's planned assault into the Arbor Wilds to intercept whatever Corypheus was trying to find in that area.

It had been a dreary and chilly morning when the advisors finally finished their final reports in the war room for Amell who had made one last trip into the Forbidden Oasis and wasn't due back until the morrow. "Elven ruins for the most part," Leliana had pursed her lips as she traced different potential paths from Skyhold to the Arbor Wilds on the world map, "Solas would need to lead us. He claims to have invaluable information on the architectures, namely, which relics could still be used by the Elder One." The Spymaster had straightened to her full height and squarely met the gaze of her coworkers, "This may be our one chance to decisively strike at our enemies' forces. It has been a year since we had left Haven, more than a year since our establishment. We've all changed and grown in those ensuing months for the better. I would like to say, before what could possibly be our final battle: Cullen," a brief nod, "and Josie," a fleeting smile, "It has been a pleasure working by your side."

Josephine had returned the Spymaster's sentiments, "Has it been that long? It seemed just yesterday that Cassandra had formally introduced me to the Herald and I had worried that she would collapse mid-meeting from her inadequate recovery." She glanced out the window, tapping her pen against the frosted glass, "How time flies... From strangers to acquaintances to friends to-" a sly glance was directed his way, "something more."

She stood in the shadows of the massive frames, leaning over the wooden wheels that rose to her chest, examining the taught rope of the sling that was humming with unreleased tension with brimming curiosity. The last few days had changed her back from a frail ghost to the vibrant young woman he knew, though there were remnants of fatigue that came from the chaos immediately after the explosion of the Conclave. He was happy to see that she was recovering well, though to admit these things to her was another matter entirely. He cleared his throat. "Amell?"

Her magic pulsed out in alarm - a heady smell of salt water washed over him as she spun on her heels and took a step back. "Oh," was her immediate response - carefully neutral, with neither hostility nor happiness. At least she didn't look frightened after recognizing him - ...it was progress. "Cullen. You're here." She adopted a stance that reminded him of a cornered halla, fiddling with her hands and nervously chewing on her lower lip. "Why are you here?"
Looking for you. Since he had heard the clamor that morning from the arrival of Mother Giselle and her fellow Chantry sisters from the battlegrounds of the Mage-Templar war, he had anticipated the mid-day advisor meeting with some amount of trepidation and excitement; it had been almost a week since he managed to extend a hand of renewed friendship to her before she had departed for the Hinterlands and had hoped to catch her after he had wrapped up his weekly reports. But she hadn't appeared. Sister Leliana, with a knowing smirk, had informed him that she had bowed out at the last minute, "Poor thing looked a bit peaked - she made some noise about surveying our defenses here in Haven, which aren't much, I'm afraid. Just as well - she missed Chancellor Roderick's spat with Seeker Cassandra. You can search for her after we finish. Now, I want to share with you a letter from King Alistair about refugees in..."

Cullen waved a hand at the rows of machinery that were aimed at the northern borders, "I was, ahh, going to calibrate the trebuchets." Mentally, he slapped himself upon the head: why couldn't he tell her the truth? Why was he still nervous around her? He was a grown man, not some boy who still couldn't speak to pretty girls. Likewise, she was not a girl anymore, she was a grown woman for whom the years had treated her...

"Oh" She gave one last wistful look upwards to the heavy counterweights, eyes half-lidded in the afternoon sun, "Then, I'll leave you alone to-"

"No!" She froze in midstep and slowly turned, blinking down at her upper arm where he grabbed her, then stared up at him as if trying to understand his intentions, as if she didn't understand him at all. But he refused to let go - to do so would mean that she would leave. She did not pull away. He tried not to read into her gestures or the absence of them. "No," his other hand made an aborted attempt to rub his neck, "I mean, you don't have to leave. You were here first and I don't want you to- you-you won't bother me." Maker's breath. He was bad at this but his words seemed to have an effect on her - wariness slowly morphed into curiosity. He took a deep breath, "I'd like it if you'd stay. Here. With me.

It took her a few heartbeats to respond, "Oh," she repeated for the third time - but this time that word was accompanied by a shy smile. "Alright." She craned her neck back again, "So how would you do that?"

With her in such close proximity, his brain did not registered her words that came after she had said yes. "Pardon?"

She waved a hand upward in a wide arc as she clarified, "the calibrations? Your trebuchets are grand. I've never seen them so big and so..." She trailed off, unable to find the correct descriptive phrases for her marvel, "I'm just admiring - but if you're working on them- Is there anything I can do to help?"

He directed her to the scopes as he checked the oiled hinges and placed some bags of loose rocks into the sling. "You don't have them in Amaranthine?" he inquired as the first payload was flung into the air, noting the wind direction and strength.

Her eyes observed the near slope that shuddered from the impact from the heavy mass as she replied, "I thought about it after the darkspawn civil war- please don't ask," she hastily added when Cullen was about to inquire further, "strictly warden business. I wanted to - pretty badly. But," she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, "the forests within the arling contain mainly ash and cedar and its absolute murder trying to import lumber from non-tainted areas of Ferelden post-Blight. Orlais and the Free
Marches were an option up until I began dodging their wardens' questions about how I survived the final... Oh, sorry," She grimaced, "I'm rambling again."

"It's fine. I don't mind," he hummed as he examined the axis for any signs of rust, a small warmth curling in his chest. She was talking to him at the very least. "I'm not surprised that you have many interesting stories of your time as Warden-Commander," then he backtracked, "I mean, you are still Warden-Commander but here, no, not that-"

Her shoulders shook as she struggled to contain her amusement, "I understand. Here I'm more Herald than Warden-Commander." A smile pulled at the corners of her mouth, "I think its better that way, don't you? Can you imagine the confusion if that was not the case? Two Commanders of the Inquisition?"

Her words offered an interesting image: Haven is filled with green recruits, wet around the ears, each with a training regimen that was not for the faint of heart. He had swore to Seeker Cassandra that he would shape the people serving the Inquisition and, by the Maker, they will become respected soldiers. He dryly remarked, "my messengers would melt into puddles out of sheer nerves." She laughed, her entire countenance brightening from mirth - he drank in her image: the afternoon sun shining a halo in her dark hair, lower half of her face shielded by her hands, grey eyes peaking through her fingers: and promptly turned red when he accidentally met her eyes. Similarly, a flush slowly rose from beneath the loose collar of her shirt, traveling slowly up her neck. *It doesn't mean anything -he told himself - In the Circle, it was common for her to become embarrassed whenever you were embarrassed.*

She awkwardly coughed, lowering her gaze to her idle fingers that traced the wood grain. "So... Um, stories... Oh!" She perked up and leaned over the throwing arm, "Have you ever see a dwarf try to swim?"

Deciding to humor her non-sequitur, he shook his head, "Most dwarves I've met try to stay away from open waters. Even the rare exceptions, usually Carta members, are very careful when they approach the docks." He rubbed his chin as he remembered, "Some of the Ferelden mages were trying to convince that dwarf that you brought from Orzammar to try swimming in Lake Calenhad but I wouldn't know if she ever did."

"Dagna..." She murmured as she propped a hip against a wheel, "I wonder what she's up to..." Then, she gave a full body shiver, as if waking up from a reverie, "Right. Story," and tried to recreate the map of the Storm Coast with her hands, "Because Amaranthine is so close to the Waking Sea, I made it mandatory for every Grey Warden, even the dwarves, to learn how to swim. The first lesson was a fantastic disaster. Oghren, one of my companions that had traveled with me during the Blight, was not happy. Sigrun was a bit scared, as were all the other dwarven recruits."

"I take it you were successful? How did you manage that?" He tried to imagine her happily swimming along the shore and failed. In the Circle, Anders was the only one who knew the four proper swimming styles. Amell more often than not preferred to skip pebbles and make little sand castles.

"I wasn't the one who had to teach them." A hand went up to her chest, her fingers skimmed the surface of her Warden's Oath amulet as she described the event, "I was conveniently sick. Warden-Constable Nathaniel kindly volunteered himself as the instructor." She proceeded to weave a picture of her second-in-command, a surly yet strangely fussy man, standing in waist-deep waters with a gaggle of dwarves padding
happily around him like imprinted ducks. "I had to bodily throw Oghren in. You should have heard the expletives coming out of his mouth."

Cullen chuckled as he mused, "A fruitful lesson then, save for the rocky start. It's an idea... I should threaten Varric with swimming lessons the next time he keeps badgering me for-" stories about us. The words lodged themselves in his throat. Their relationship was nearing the closeness they had shared before her Harrowing... Almost. Small steps. Patience... "I actually have a similar story, if you'd like to hear it," he hesitantly offered and continued when encouraged by her smile, "A month after I had transferred to the Gallows of Kirkwall, Knight-Commander Meredith made a new decree that all templars must be able to make the swim from the Gallows to the docks and back again. On the fateful day of her test, First Enchanter Orsino took the apprentices to the highest windows of the towers to watch..."

"Cullen?" She draped her arms around his shoulders from behind, rousing him from his reminiscing. "You've been staring at the same spot on the paper for the past ten minutes." He laid a hand on her arm and sighed, leaning back against her chest as he glanced about his office that was empty save for two of them. Arcanist Dagna had returned to her research in the Undercroft after she realized that she was fighting a losing battle for Samson's judgment, leaving the special rune made from the remains of Maddox's research at the corner of his desk by his unfinished drawing of the Arbor Wilds.

It has been a pleasure working by your side.

He worried so - anxiety growing day by day. Not enough equipment. Not enough scouts to map the area. Not enough information about the Venatori and red lyrium templar numbers. Not enough contingency plans. "Look after yourself," he urged, fingers digging into her sleeves, "I know I said this so many times but... Please... I don't know if I can take another..." Watching her walk out the doors of the Haven Chantry alone to face the Elder One and his army. Watching her fall with the dragon off a crumbling walkway and into a fade rift. Maker have mercy. His heart could not take anymore abuse.

Amell stayed silently contemplative for a long time - seconds dragged into minutes. He could feel the rise and fall of her chest against his shoulder, the slight puff of her breath over the top of his hair. "I can't tell you that I will return - that's not how this world works." He pulled her into his lap, buried his face into her hair, and breathed, shuddering as her fingers traced the line from his neck down to his shoulder. "But," she continued, "As long as I live, nothing will stop my attempts to return to your side, no matter how far we parted." She slowly exhaled, "That's all I can promise."

"That's enough," he muttered as she twisted into a more comfortable position so that her head rested against his collarbone. He hoped that it was enough. It has to be enough.

Solas

They had used the last of their poultices and regeneration potions before they reached the entrance of the Temple of Mythal. They looked less like a specialized infiltration squad and more like a ragged team of survivors - the Inquisitor in particular, who stared at the sentinels through a curtain of hair and blood, one eye forced shut from the swelling above her brow. She leaned heavily on the shoulder of Arcane Advisor Morrigan, magic fluctuating just above her skin, causing the rows of elf sentinels to tense and draw their weapons out of precaution. "Dirth'ena Enasalin," one hoarsely declared, "How did the shemlen come to possess such skill?"

"I did not steal it," Amell muttered as her aura shrunk back, "I once gave last rites to a phylactery spirit. He had agreed to teach me the skill." Her crutch bared her teeth, her own magic, embodying a
feral element that was more mother bear than human, more elven than human, blanketed the Petitioner's Chamber. A few of the sentinels took a step back, brow furrowing in confusion when they realized that the slightly acrid taste in her mana matched the signature of Mythal's magic.

"An admirable act of kindness that not many will stoop to offer," an elvish spellweaver slowly enunciated, knuckled white from her tight grip on her staff, "But the information you have given to the guardians is lacking. Your skill, knowledge," she waved the staff towards Morrigan but did not elaborate on the woman’s connection with the temple, "and companions do not mollify our worries."

Amell ran a hand through her hair in agitation, winced, and pulled away with smeared blood covering her palm.. "We are wasting time and not in any position to dawdle!" Morrigan snapped, her fraying temper growing increasingly thin, "Our reserves are low, we are injured, we have used up our supplies in our journey through these wilds from our forward camp, Corypheus's red templars roam your lands and your temple, and still you hold us here in this chamber for meaningless questions." She took a step forward, skin morphing between fur, feathers, and scales, "Perhaps we should have disregarded ancient elven courtesies and not bothered to solve your puzzles, like our enemies."

Abelas bristled at her snide comment, "Do not insinuate that we are not courteous and fair, witch. We honor your consideration for our traditions." A few of the temple guardians shifted uneasily from their battle-ready stance as he waved a hand toward the spellweaver who grudgingly stepped forward. His eyes slid from Sera who’s ears were pinned to her skull, lips peeled back over surprisingly pointed canines, to Solas who was careful not to respond to any unspoken challenge, keeping a tight lock on his already muted magic, wondering if the sentinels could detect the similarities of his mana with that which was emanating off the mosaic walls. "We have enough information to know that you are not a threat thus far. She will take you. Do not stray far from her for she will not wait."

"Come." The spellweaver grunted and jerked her head to a hidden passage where the walls began to fold in upon themselves, already moving through the doorway before it was fully formed. With a significant look toward her Inner Circle, Amell angled her head to the entrance, a silent 'after you' in her motions. Sera huffed and darted through, opening up locked chests in dark corners of the hallways, cursing when she couldn't find additional potions or salves.

"How do you feel, Inquisitor?" Cassandra inquired the group slowly limped past a half opened door to the inner sanctum where the red templars skirmished with archer sentinels. Their guide ignored the war cries and sounds of metal clashing against metal, disappearing around the corner without even slowing her pace.

"What a daft question: just look at her!" Sera cried, holding an armful of miscellaneous weaponry and armor, a two-handed maul dragging along the ground behind her, "Ever since Coryphe-fee pulled off that 'dying and body snatching a warden' trick, she looked absolutely shitty!" Sera cringed at her own word choice and made an effort to whisper out of the Inquisitor's hearing range, "What if she hadn't been wearing that necklace? Do you think he would've used her and we would have to kill...?"

Amell's hearing, however, was sharper than Sera had anticipated. "Try not to think about the what-ifs. I'm fine," she reassured and quailed under Morrigan's steely glare. "I'm not fine." she humorlessly laughed as she corrected her previous statement, resting her head against the other woman's shoulder, breaths growing more strained with every step, "just like old times, right, Morrigan? Except," she tripped over a loose tile, "ahh, except this time there's no unborn child to save me from being possessed-."
"Do not finish that sentence!" Morrigan insisted, arm tightening around Amell's waiste, "Concentrate on the task at hand. We are not here to engage the Elder One, our objective is to prevent him from accessing the Well of Sorrows. I will worry about the later if you worry about the now, Amell. I promise."

Amell closed her eyes, breathing leveling out from shallow to normal, "Alright." Slowly, the trembling in her fingers stilled; Mythal's pendant glowed dimly red, swinging a low curve below her collar bone, "Your goal is lofty and admirable. I won't get mad if you cannot find a solution to this dilemma."

"I do not appreciate being the optimistic one of the duo," Morrigan sneered, hands clenching at her sides, "I will." She swore, "I did then. I will now. We will speak no more of your possible death." Amell's responding smile, though weak, held more than just a hint of hope for her future. Morrigan held her staff aloft; three carved snakes frozen in a curved state acted as a pedestal that bore a lilac mage light, "I had not expected the temple protections to still remain semi-animated after centuries of Uthenera." She mused with a oddly hungry tone, "Ancient magics are truly a wonder to behold."

Sera's face scrunched inward as she stuck out her tongue in disgust, "Ancient magic is boring. Old elves have zero imagination." Solas felt mildly offended on behalf of his people, "They all look like each other. ...And Solas-" Here, she spun on her heels and squinted at his face: specifically, his forehead. "Why do they all look like Solas?"

Sera has a peculiar talent with words - mocking undertone, teasing every aspect of those she doesn't care for - but this particular question held more suspicion than derision. "Perhaps you are unused to seeing people with a lack of hair," he answered flatly, smoothing the shock from his features, "and you suffer from facial blindness."

"Nope," Sera plucked her bowstring and paused long enough to listen to the reverberation echo off the mosaic walls, "You're also muscle-y and bigger like them too - and the same egg-shaped head. You all feel weird." Her brows furrowed as she turned to Cassandra, "Didn't he say something about shared blood back in the other room? Maybe he is-"

"Sera," Cassandra exasperatedly sighed from her position at the front point of the group, "Not all bald elves are related."

Sera blinked in disbelief, "So... What? You don't see it?"

"Now that you've mentioned it," Morrigan muttered under her breath, as the group slowly hobbled up the stairs, "I am reminded of Zathrian in a very unpleasant manner." That name again - he wondered what the man had done to earn such enmity from both mages, "whose actions had taught me that people and wolves do not mix. You seem like the type to wander the Brecilian Forest, elf. Do you also share poetry with the Grand Oak and confer with Spirits of the Forest with the sole purpose of revenge-"

"I would be grateful if people applied less thought into my personal life and more into our race against Corypheus's soldiers," Solas sharply interrupted as a chill ran down his spine at the mention of 'wolves.'

Morrigan blithely continued, "Do non-city elves typically name themselves after such negative emotions? Abelas of Abelasan. He does look sorrowful. However, you do not look prideful, Solas."

"His pride is subtle," Amell gritted between clenched teeth when she accidentally pressed weight on her mangled leg. "As is his past - which he can get very touchy about. So children, if we can please stop the squabbling..." she paired her last words with a warning glare, clearly expecting the
conversation to die with her. The discussion moved on to other, safer topics, though Morrigan did not stop sulking, the corners of her mouth pulling down, until they reached the Well of Sorrows. He inwardly breathed a sigh of relief, fully aware of how time was not on his side. Eventually, his hand in the events that shaped the Inquisition and all of Thedas will be revealed - but until then, he will continue to hide.

"Pride in our accomplishments and in our hearts. That same pride became - within him, he sought to claim -, cast from favor and so he was bound," Amell haltingly translated the inscription that delineated the entrance to Solas from elvish, the final temple of the Forbidden Oasis. Her finger traced the carved lines; the mark of the rift on her palm hissed as a jolt of light emerged from her bandaged hand and onto the stone, briefly illuminating the chamber in verdant. "It sounds like a warning."

"Perhaps it is," Solas drifted past the corpses of the undead and the single pride demon laying at the center of the altar. One hundred and fourteen shards scattered through Orlais and Ferelden to finally reach the place that shared his name. He could feel the electricity from beneath the crypt, sizzling against the inner walls, waiting to surge into the first person that pushed aside the lid.

"Or a precautionary tale." She stared at her mark in fascination, pupils nearly luminescent in the near pitch black like those of elves, "Is this the appropriate time to ask if there was a reason why you named yourself Pride?"

At her words, a sudden fatigue permeated to his marrow that reminded him of his own forced Uthenera; he sank to his knees, a cracked pillar providing counterbalance. He hadn't felt this exhausted since he had sealed the Veil against his compatriots. "Pride certainly isn't a name mothers name to their babes," Solas rubbed his face with a gloved hand, "you are correct in that presumption. The name is to remind myself of regrets stemming from my arrogant youth. They still follow me to this day."

"Follow you?" Her steps were soundless against the dull hum, louder against the floors and platform, softer by the entrance. "Before you joined the Inquisition?"

"Yes. I am in the midst of rectifying my lapse in judgment." Pressing a knuckle against his forehead, he wondered if he once again had revealed too much. "That is all I can tell you. I'm sorry." She dropped the conversation, but the frown on her visage did not lessen even as they emerged out of the temple and back into sunlight.

Morrigan stood on the rim of the well while Amell sat on the precipice, boots just a few inches above the water filled to the brim with souls and wills. Abelas, mollified by Amell's gentle persuasion that had been decorated by flecks of blood and wheezing breaths, had retreated back to the inner sanctum after granting the Inquisition permission to drink its waters. "Are you sure about this, Morrigan?" She dubiously asked, a hand pressed against a wound in her thigh, tilting her head towards the surface as if hearing the whispers of wisdom and memories, "The last time you asked me for a favor, you received a child with the soul of an old god. Here, you seem to know even less of what you're getting into." She dipped a toe into the water and pulled back, shivering, as her touch drew silver, gleaming ripples. "I know you want this but... in cases of questionable and obscure branches of magic, you are significantly more headstrong than I and I worry."

"Yet you are not stopping me," Morrigan replied in a mild tone. Amell pursed her lips and shook her head. "Catch me if I fall? It'll be highly undignified if I faint in such a crass manner." Amell giggled, amused and slightly hysterical. Morrigan stepped one foot in front of the other and lowered herself into the Well of Sorrows.
Morrigan

The voices clamored about in her head - there was not enough space in her mind to accommodate the endless servants that whispered in the gap between her ears, in that area in her skull that she could not touch. Kieran, the little waif of a child that he was (Have the cooks been spoiling his evening meals with snacks? He has a horrible weakness for sweet buns.) had carefully sneaked in a tray of biscuits and tea, his stealth ruined by his own inquiry as he slid his gift onto a folding table on her right, "Mother? Are you well?"

Morrigan resisted the urge to press her palms against her eyes, feeling an aching pressure building up behind her sockets. *Urthemiel does not belong in a mortal body. What have you done, child? The whispers grow louder in indignation. It feels wrong... Wrong... Wrong...* She accepted a cup and took a sip: aged Camellia leaves, embrium flowers, and a dash of milk and honey. "You soothe the ailment, my son. Now come here and finish your history worksheet." Kieran squirmed out of her affectionate hold and darted to the other side of her desk, pouting as Morrigan pushed his classwork towards him.

"The tutors talk of things I already know," he protested as he pulled opened a drawer and retrieved his quill and inkwell. "Surely you can't expect me to recite verbatim that which I've witnessed." Morrigan reached over and tweak his ear. "Mother!" With a quailing look, he obediently shuffled back into his seat and glumly opened his books,

Morrigan turned back to her own notes and pinched the bridge of her nose. She had been studying her research for the better part of the day, trying to parse out any information that would help her find a solution, any clue, as to how to prevent... "No unborn child to save me from being possessed... I won't get mad if you can not find a solution to this dilemma...' She gritted her teeth as Amell's voice mixed with that of Mythal's followers. *The pride that was once wrought within the community of magic users has since been controlled. How is it that only the tainted can learn the secrets to an immortal life?*

After escaping through the Eluvian and into the Crossroads, barely dodging Corypheus's clutches, his enraged roar drowning out the shatter of mirror glass, Amell had stumbled into the private room that led toward the gardens of Skyhold and immediately collapsed into a healing trance. Though she had woken up just hours ago, the nurses did not allow her to rise from her bed and had drugged her soup with a sleeping agent when she had tried to escape their hold. Morrigan had visited her bedside as she drifted in and out of consciousness, "I don't want to die," Amell had whispered as if imparting a guilty secret, "I had accepted it before the Battle of Denerim with the Archdemon. I would have invited Death in with tea and a plate of buttered scones. But since then... Now... I don't want to die." Her red pendant sat innocently below her collar bone - Flemeth's fire opal - a tempered gem with passion and power rivaled only by its selectivity in users. "Is it selfish of me to not want to die?"

"Your martyr tendencies are sickening. Thankfully, I am used to your dramatic antics." Morrigan had answered in a distracted manner as she extracted a sample of the pendant's magic into a crystal vial she held between two fingers and bottled the contents. "Hush. I told you that I will fix this." She will move heaven and earth before she would allow Amell's body to be desecrated by such a creature - a mad darkspawn with impossible dreams of godhood - a Tevinter magister that was one of the seven responsible for introducing the Corruption to the world. "You will not die."

The sample of Flemeth's protective spell sat at the corner of Morrigan's stack of notes as she drummed her fingernails against the vellum in thought. Her time with various Dalish clans had given her some insight to the nature of Keeper magics - almost forgotten rituals dating back to Arlathan that relied upon the phases of the moon and stars, offering to Keepers and Firsts some amount of protection against possession from demons. How alike were demons and darkspawn? Lore spoke of
the Black City in the Fade to be the source of the Taint - but was that close enough to match the essence of Deep Road Corruption... In an attempt to coax a response from the spell, she fed the crystal vial a tendril of her own magic and observed its transformation from a blue hue to a blood red.

"What are you doing mother?" Her son frowned, "you're making it angry."

'Tis not unfamiliar to have Urthemiel admonish through her son's mouth her tendency towards spell experimentation, a interest that had led her friendship with Amell down increasingly volatile paths in terms of elemental and primal force (the memory of their first successful Storm of the Century still brought a smile to her lips), reminding her of Flemeth's discipline when she was still a young girl roaming the Korcari Wilds and trying to mix lightning and entropy. "Some risks must be made for the sake of progress, Kieran," she replied. None the less, she quickly inscribed a glyph of warding around the vial as it began to shake and tremble. This mana surge feels familiar... "Mythal..." she murmured in astonishment, narrowing her eyes in thought, "I recognize this signature from the Temple. What aspect of Mythal can protect one from Blight related consequences? Why would my mother..."

"The protections the goddess weaves are known only to her." Kieran ducked his head to give an expression of distaste to his half-finished homework and then raised his head to stare at her with imploring eyes, "May I take a break? I can help you. I know I can."

Morrigan would have smiled indulgently at the strange amalgamation of naivete and wisdom if not for the terrified glances he had shot at the red vial - instead, she shuffled a few books to the side and flipped to a bookmarked page that speculated upon the nature of the Veil barrier and its seemingly man-made origins. "What would you have me do to learn of Mythal's secrets?" Never has such an old soul been transposed into such a young mind - have you ever worried about the consequences of such a feat? How much does your son remember? How much can he articulate?

Kieran set his quill back into its holder and reached into his pocket to pull out his beloved Ferelden toy soldier - his hands, small and soft with a child's characteristic plumpness, bare and smooth to the touch, contrasted spectacularly against the chipped paint and splintered wood. "I can take you to Mythal. I hear her calling for me." He raised a hand to his ear in a listening motion. As he hugged the carved statue close to his chest, he added, "You should get her too. She should come along." Does he mean Amell? Never before has he been so forthcoming. Morrigan hesitated to respond - why was her son taking a proactive role in his destiny, now of all times, using his forbidden knowledge to aid her? Is Urthemiel planning something sinister? She still remembered the burning wreckage that surrounded Fort Drakon, how the Urthemiel alighted upon the top of the tower and screamed. She still remembered how the soul of the old god hovered above the tower like a beacon after Amell had slain the Archdemon, before surging toward her at an impossible speed, embedding itself into her lower abdomen. When she had first given birth to the boy, weeks ahead of her predicted date, a small, ugly, red thing wrapped in threadbare blankets, she hadn't known what to expect. But she had looked down at the face (her bone structure, Alistair's eyes) and resolved to love him, a fierce protectiveness forming from what she had previously believed to be a stone heart. "Please mother, I wish to help. Do you trust me?"

Does she? Ten years of raising a not-child from infancy to prepubescence. Ten years of motherhood - of soothing inflamed gums, of kissing small wounds that come from playing in the woods, of telling stories for long travels from lonely village to lonely village. Was this Kieran or Urthemiel? Was there no line that delineated the boundary between young and old? Ten years of motherhood... She wavered for a brief moment before taking his proffered hand, "Of course."
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

THE FINAL PIECE

Cullen

"Blessed are they who stand before the corrupted and the wicked and do not falter," he pressed his gloved hands against his forehead, digging the leather into his brow as he swayed slightly in his kneeling position. The heat emanating from the red candles kissed his skin; sweat trickled from his brow and down the edge of his jaw, "Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just. Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow. In their blood the Maker's will is written-"

Hours later, he rose slowly to his feet, grimacing as his joints creaked and popped like a man twice his age. Spots of fire danced in his vision, the statue of Andraste seemed to twist and shift as blood rushed out of his head. With one last exhale, slow and soft, he straightened and exited the small room, leaving behind the atmosphere of spirituality and reverence. He breathed in the scent of rare herbs collected from the vast reaches of the Inquisition: witherstalk, prophet's laurel, felandaris... A small group of children were herded by a bespectacled tutor through a classroom door, giggling as they ran with little flower crowns of dawn lotus. "Maker watch over you, Lady Inquisitor!" A young boy spun around and shouted at a figure sitting aside the low wall, one leg laying atop the stop and the other hanging off the side.

There. She turned her head and smiled when he approached her periphery and shuffled closer to the limestone column. He took the silently offered seat and took her hand, threading their fingers together, "Hi," he softly greeted.

She leaned over to kiss his cheek, "Hi."

Her unconscious state was one of distressed exhaustion, not the type of fitful sleep of peace and serenity that he usually saw from her after their nightly spars. Her face seemed devoid of blood, ghostly pale, lips a shade of worrying blue, matching the sheets and the comforter that covered her small form. He pressed two fingers against the pulse of her wrist, drawing comfort from its weak yet steady rhythm. "'Tis most interesting," Arcane Advisor Morrigan's voice started behind him just as his mind began to drift into a light doze, "how you've changed her.

Changed? It seemed like nothing has changed since he had begged her to stay safe before his troops had escorted her to the Arbor Wilds. Again she faced close calls, returning to Skyhold and nearly succumbing to her wounds. After receiving a message from one of the Skyhold ravens, he had left the standing army in the capable hands of Ser Rylen and had rushed to her bedside. Days later and she only just began to twitch and stir. Skyhold was vulnerable from the lack of soldiers. She was vulnerable from... 'At least she didn't offer herself as a sacrifice to Corypheus or plummet into the Fade this time,' he thought humorlessly, "I don't understand what you're implying."

Morrigan heaved a sigh, facial expressions flitting from amusement to pity to
exasperation, "Has she ever told you of the night before she slayed the Archdemon? The Archdemon is an old god; the soul of an old god is immortal. One cannot kill an old god without becoming a martyr unless a ritual has been set up before the event to force the Archdemon's freed soul to travel, not into the warden but into a ready-made container."

He steepled his fingers and closed his eyes as he felt the distinct roar that precluded a headache. "Why are you telling me this?" He gritted his teeth, his instincts flaring in alarm from the acquired knowledge, "You know who I am." An ex-templar of Kinloch Hold and the Gallows, Commander of, at present, the most influential military organization in Thedas, with the power to remove anyone he deemed a threat to the Inquisition and to his beloved Inquisitor. He wouldn't make a preemptive strike against her - yet he would've thought that his reputation during his stay in Kirkwall would have given her pause, "you know what I've done."

"Because she trusts you," she pursed her lips, as Amell shifted her head further along the pillow. He reached out and brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face, "and despite my reservations, I have decided to trust you too." Her eyes hardened into coals, "if you dare even threaten me, not even she can save you from my wrath." He didn't flinch as her hands began to tint with the familiar purple energy of an entropy spell. After she was certain that he understood her threat, she huffed, crossed her arms, and turned her attention back onto the patient, "'Twas my idea," her tone turned weary, "She was fine with dying."

"She was fine with... "What?" A chill ran down his back and sank cold into his bones as he hesitantly asked, not wanting to know but needing to know the answer, "She... Did she - did she wish for death?" Was it because of the hateful words he had said to her? Morrigan shifted her posture, "She was not suicidal, no. One would not know those inner thoughts of hers unless one asked her specifically her thoughts on that fateful night - and she would say, with that familiar smile on her face, that she saw herself as... expendable." Cullen wiped a hand across his face. "She thought that this was how her destiny would end."

"She was wrong," he cleared his throat when he realized that his tone seemed to ask for confirmation from her end, "She lived."

"I wonder whether she conceded out of sheer disbelief - it was the first time that Alistair and I finally agreed upon something." Her finger traced the family markings on Amell's cheek; still asleep, the woman turned towards the delicate touch, "It wasn't selfish to wish for her to live. Her survival was important to all of us." Morrigan drew her finger back, "Following the ritual, we went our separate ways and Amell wandered Ferelden like a restless spirit."

"How could she think that?" How would the world have turned out if she had died a decade earlier? "Her worth is not... We treasure her more than that. Does she think..." An Inquisition without her? What about him? Would the hollowness in his chest never disappear? Would he try to seek other ways of filling the hole? Another companion?

"She does now. Thanks to you." Cullen looked up, eyes widening as Morrigan gave an bark of laughter, "She didn't welcome death with open arms in the Arbor Wilds. She fought against the implications of becoming a sacrifice." Because Corypheus can use
the body of a living warden to keep his immortality... Cassandra had described the ensuing events to him in an uncharacteristic stilted manner, face grimacing from the memories. "She accepted my help."

-how you've changed her. His face flushed red, "You think that I- I..." He wouldn't flatter himself to say that his love for her had caused her to... But for a third party to see and to make an observation that had his heart soaring...

Morrigan stared at him critically, as if weighing his worth against the love of her dear friend - he dared not to shrink back, "'Tis not much, but 'tis a start." Are you talking of her or of me? Cullen rolled his eyes and sighed about the quirks of Amell's overly protective friends. In Haven, Leliana had been sharpening her daggers when she had casually asked him about his intentions toward Amell. Hawke had threatened to cast a rain of fire upon him if he should ever hurt her. Cullen even received a letter from Warden-Constable Nathaniel Howe who had dully informed him that he was capable of sending out an entire warden army to Skyhold on the back of griffons if he so wished and another from King Alistair who had cheerfully detailed the excellent renovations just finished on the dungeons of Fort Drakon (Cullen suspected that the Queen had a hand in the writing).

"Thank you," he replied and hastily added when her expression changed from minor bemusement into suspicion, "Not only for the conversation but also," he squeezed Amell's hand; she murmured in her sleep, "trying to find a way to save her." She did not loose hope. He must not loose hope. "If there's anything I can do to repay you..." He trailed off, suddenly unsure what an apostate from the Korcari Wilds, a mother of an old god, and an Arcane Advisor to the Orlesian Court could find use in him.

He received a noise of disgust at his overly emotional state and a flat look. "If word spreads that I've counseled a templar's... Pardon me... an ex-templar's relationship with a mage, she'll never let me hear the end of it." Cullen was unsure whether she spoke of Amell or Leliana and did not feel the need to ask. Morrigan huffed as she gathered herself and retreated to the door, throwing over her shoulder one last parting word. "If anyone were to ask, we never talked. Good day, Commander."

"How were your troops when you left them?" She asked with a crooked grin, beaming happily at him underneath a slew of bandages, tape, and gauze.

"In unconquerable high spirits," he replied as his eyes scanned the grounds: a few Chantry sisters gossiping as they repotted amrita vein into dryer soil, a few soldiers enjoying the sun as they waited for the healers to attend to their wounds, a family of three making their way to the chapel to pay their respects, "Knight-Captain Rylen was joining them in their songs. You should expect a few more new tavern lyrics regarding your heroism by the time they return from the Arbor Wilds."

She groaned, burying her face in her arms, "How did it get this bad? I used to beg the cooks to make dishes native to Amaranthine. I used to sneak into a tavern without being recognized. I used to be able to talk to people like a normal person. Now..." She gestured wildly with her arms, wincing as she pulled newly healed skin, and slumped into his side. "How are you?" She mumbled into the fabric that wrapped his chest plate, "General Samson isn't giving you any grief?"

"We've all been betrayed by the Order and the Chantry, old friend. We've all remade ourselves. Some of us just took different paths. You could've easily taken mine." Samson laughed, "Imagine that." General Cullen? He is the most trusted soldier under Corypheus - eyes as red as the red lyrium he eats. Listen, Amell. He's not the same
"Cullen you knew in Kinloch Hold. He's worse than the Cullen you heard about in Kirkwall. He'll take your head and proudly display it to his men if you're not careful."

"He's compliant." The man used to talk about anything and everything - Maddox and paper birds, civil disobedience of Chantry policies, the immorality of retaining a mage's skills without having to treat him as a person. "His insight regarding red lyrium's effects on templars is invaluable and..." Cullen rubbed the back of his neck, window as his fingers dug into knotted muscle, "it's hard to tell, but he has recovered more of his faculties since you've judged him."

"You found a little haven, haven't you? I thought it was impossible for people like us to find peace in a world where even the righteous believed that a natural end point for any person is to become a bloody tool. You left Kirkwall to find it. Never really thought you would succeed. I thought I would too." Raleigh Samson, a betrayed man, a bitter man, a defeated man, smiled with glowing red eyes, "Maybe our results were different because your mage charge wasn't Tranquil."

"Good." She closed her eyes, pressing her face into his fur pauldron, "I'm glad."

She was about to fall asleep. The part of him that wished for her to rest warred with the part that wished to say his piece after both of them kept side-stepping the topic they both knew needed to be addressed. Sacrifice... Martyr... No longer... He struggled to find the words to smoothly segue into the subject of Corypheus and wardens. In the end, he settled for his usual tactic of Rutherford ineptitude and blurted out, "You're not going to die." She raised her head and stared at him in bewilderment. He winced at the non-sequitur, feeling his ears beginning to heat, but he hurriedly continued, "I- I won't-"

"Inquisitor?" Morrigan interrupted from behind. He felt Amell's skin jump lightly underneath his touch and wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or grateful for the interruption. He turned around and greeted her with a curt nod, receiving the same acknowledgment in turn. Kieran stood quietly at her side, loosely grasping onto her ragged skirt with one hand and clutching onto a worn Ferelden toy soldier with another. The boy waved solemnly at him; Cullen smiled back in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. Amell slowly extricated herself from his hold and looked at the other woman in silent inquiry. "Inquisitor. A moment of your time, if you will?"

Amell

Both Amell and Flemeth watched as Kieran's small form was swallowed by Morrigan's shaking arms. Grandmother, daughter, mother, son, grandson... Flemeth twisted her wrist, examining the blue orb that levitated between the claws of her black gauntlets, uncaring as some tendrils of light trickle between her grip, dissolving into the air of the Fade. Amell's head pounded like someone had taken a mallet to her skull : her senses alerted her to a high concentration of Corruption - in her, around her, saturating the very ground she stood on. Did the eluvian lead her into the Nightmare's lair again? No... It's Taint - but it's not the Calling. Judging by its intensity, she was surprised that she wasn't drowning in darkspawn at this very moment. "I'm glad you did what you did," she awkwardly told the elder woman, "You would've destroyed her if you took Kieran."

"Preserving the old ways often requires a sacrifice on one's part. But there were many circumstances where I've found a third path." Flemeth's eyes narrowed as she took in the scene: regret, sadness, nostalgic - Amell wondered how life must have been with the Witch of the Wilds as a mother, a, according to Morrigan, not quite loving mother. Amell shuffled to her right, pointedly placing herself between Flemeth and the scene and got a raised eyebrow for her efforts, "I will not change my mind, child. In fact, I am pleased."
Amell narrowed her eyes, knowing that with her bandages, her stiffness, her bruises, that she looked as threatening as hissing kitten, "Pleased? Was this all a game for the Ash'a'bellanar?" She chanced a look back - Morrigan hadn't hear them, still shaken from the fact that she had nearly lost her son. "Does Mythal like testing her children?" Amell didn't voice her other thoughts that were surely to offend - if Mythal was reduced to a spirit, does that make Flemeth, in the strictest definition, an abomination? Like Wynne and Anders and Conner and Uldred... With such a variety of possessed people, she failed to create a solid opinion on the practice. "Did she pass?"

Flemeth pursed her lips in displeasure - it was an emotion that Amell had seen countless times on her daughter. (They also share the same nose - but only Alistair was brave enough to point that out.) "Yes. But what irks me is that I have not yet passed hers. Motherhood was never my strong suite. I was reborn as vengeance rising to meet the fears and terrors of those who betrayed us. I did not have time to think of the finer art of how to raise emotionally stable children and it shows within her and her sisters." The old woman angled her head back and closed her eyes, as if reveling in the uncomfortable atmosphere of the Fade (the scar from the Breach in the distance, a fountain of blood, an abandoned throne with shackles... Where did the eluvian take them?) "And you, a motherless daughter, are doing enviously better than any."

"...It's a different sort of guardianship." She was not about to narrate her earliest memories in life of how First Enchanter (Senior Enchanter at the time) Irving, Knight Commander (then Knight-Captain) Greagoir, and just about every adult in the Ferelden Circle fumbled about with her upbringing, more familiar with the tantrums of an adolescent than than the crying of a baby, "You're wrong too: Morrigan is as fine as I am." The woman had long settled into some semblance of nomadic stability.

("Have I always known nothing?" Morrigan will ask later when they returned to Skyhold, a finger trailing along the edge of the mirror around the carved ivory and gold, "I had fought so hard to be free. In my attempt to relearn the old ways, have I re-descended into subservience?" And Amell will have to reassure her that yes: it seemed that her ignorance almost proved detrimental and no: she is still free in the sense that Flemeth will leave her alone for the time being despite having willingly sworn herself to the elven goddess - Which, by the way, returning to your mother on your own volition? Dear Morrigan, that is the height of irony. Amell will be dodging chain lightning for that last comment.)

Another jolt of pain flashed across Amell's temples, so sharp that she nearly doubled over in pain. It's a good thing she didn't - her ribs, bound tight underneath her shirt, would not have forgiven her if disturbed. "If I hadn't known you," she wetted her lips, carefully keeping her breaths shallow, "I would've thought that you were another version of the Mother, just like how Corypheus is another version of the Architect. Except instead of the Taint, you feel like the Fade." Flemeth moved closer, sure steps that gave an impression of gliding, and, for a moment, Amell thought that she was going to be punished for her cheek. Instead, aged hands reached for the fire opal pendant that lay against her collarbone - the jewel responded to the touch, a small frisson that caused her to shiver. "What are you doing?"

"The one person that holds the favor of the Witch of the Wilds does not appreciate the privilege of such a position." Flemeth would have sighed if the action was not beneath her, "I'm merely improving my gift. My temple in the Arbor Wilds told me what it had seen and though I applaud my daughter's efforts in trying to stave off your death should the magister decide to transfer his conscious into your body, the knowledge of how to do so is not in my grimoire." The old woman breathed against the gem, blue tendrils in the same shade as that of the soul of Urthemiel drifted from her mouth and was absorbed by the opal. "It is within me." Amell squirmed at the sensation, "Stop moving, child."
"I can't help it," she protested as she shivered, "It feels..." There really wasn't any way to describe the power emanating from the older woman. Her magic was old, a combination of wise and ancient, elvish for certain - but closer to the aura she had waded through in the Brecilian Ruins, the aura she had spoken to in a bottled phylactery, the aura that nearly suffocated her when Morrigan had first demonstrated the eluvian's access to the Nexus. "It's very distinct," she mused as the gem, faintly glowing with its many upgrades, floated in her open palm. "Thank you." It was nice to know that she wasn't required to die for the cause... Her ensured survival has not fully sunk in yet, perhaps later at Skyhold. (Her knees will grow weak in the room holding the eluvian. Morrigan will insist on escorting her to her quarters. Cullen will still be waiting in the gardens. His face will light up when she gives him the good news.) Her mark of the rift heated from the proximity of Mythal's protections. "Now I understand how Solas recognized your magic." Amell frowned, "You would like him: he's a self proclaimed expert on hedge magic and ancient elven artifacts. Your temple saw him too. Though I can't imagine how he came upon your magic in the first place. Do you know of him?"

"I know him. But I didn't know of his new brand. Solas? Pride?" Flemeth chuckled, "Is that what the little wolf calls himself? Naming himself after his shortcoming won't rid him of it." Amell blinked in confusion - the fondness in Flemeth's tone did not match the nickname she had given to the man in question. Don't elves, especially the Dalish, hate wolves? Solas wasn't exactly Dalish - one could even say that he tried hard to not be Dalish.

"You know him on a personal level? How did you cross paths?" Amell tilted her head to the side in thought. In her mind, she could imagine rows and rows of bookshelves filled in a disorganized manner everything she had learned about the world and her subconscious running from case to case trying to sort through the information. There was a revelation hidden in there, somewhere. "Is he one of you? His magic is like a wolf, not an elf." The man had secrets that he was reluctant to reveal. During their months of close acquaintance, she had seen often seen the flickers of panic that would cross his face whenever she said something particular - wolves, magic, mythology, wardens... A lot of things tend to set him off. Flemeth smiled benignly back. Amell's eyes narrowed, "Why are you telling me this?"

Instead of giving an answer, Flemeth advised, "Think back on your Dalish mythology, child." Amell closed her eyes.

"...And that is how Fen'Harel tricked them. Our gods saw him as a brother, and they trusted him when he said that they must keep to the heavens while he arranged a truce. And the Forgotten Ones trusted him also when he said he would arrange for the defeat of our gods, if only the Forgotten Ones would return to the abyss for a time. They trusted Fen-Harel, and they were all of them betrayed. And Fen'Harel sealed them away so they could never again walk among the people," the Dalish whispered around the campfires.

"There was a wolf at my door" was one of the first words Amell had spoken to Solas.

The clues had been building themselves since she had first met the hedge mage in Haven and it was only now that the puzzle pieces merged together to form a coherent whole. She took a metaphorical step back and examined her epiphany. The Dread Wolf. He who Hunts Alone. Lord of Tricksters. Roamer of the Beyond. Bringer of Nightmares... In hindsight, the truth was fairly obvious. "Fen'Harel. Solas is Fen'Harel."

**Solas**

"You couldn't have decided at some point to tell me this?" She asked with fingers dug into her scalp, tugging at the roots of her hair. Solas pushed at the loose pebbles with his toes, idle sounds that
would cover the silence that spanned their personal bubble. Though he could hear the distant sounds of merchants, pages, nobles, horses, and the likes, the quiet that ranged between him and her was stiffening enough to be difficult for one to breath. "Would you have ever trusted me enough to tell me?"

The answer was no and never. "Would you have believed me?" *Hello. I am more than a simple elven hedge mage. I am the Dread Wolf.* His eyes flickered between her and the fork in the road behind her. Amaranthine on her left towered behind her slight form, the main gates had opened invitingly for their Arlessa, revealing beyond the doorway a bustling marketplace, various humble cottages surrounded by high walls of tanned stucco roofed with orange canvases. On her right, far in the horizon, was Vigil's Keep, a fortress of grey, ensconced in the side of a mountain. A group of young soldiers exited The Crown and Lion Tavern, laughing uproariously from some salacious joke or another.

She tilted her head to the side and made an expression that implied reliving memories best forgotten, "I've seen stranger things." Without elaboration, she swept past him and into the main, greeting a few well-wishers who recognized her on sight ("Arlessa," they murmured with a bow or curtsy) as she guided him to the southern walls, up the stairs to the battlements. "That's the Pilgrim's Path that leads straight to Denerim." She waved a hand over the parapets, "At dawn, during the harvest season, the traveling circus comes bringing squash and pumpkins from the crops grown on the Bannorn. And here," she pulled him eastward, "Vigil's Keep. Lieutenant Gable and a couple of his men are watching the place for me. Pity you can't meet my wardens, they're all in Soldier's Keep with Avernus. Though they wouldn't like you, you're a bit..." She grimaced, "Nevermind," and shook her head. When she straightened, it was as if her smile never left, "What do you think? Grand, is it not?"

He nodded in approval of her well-deserved pride - the story of how the Hero of Ferelden protected her arling was popular and widespread, despite the Grey Warden's efforts to keep the actual battle a secret. The details of that bloody day were not forthcoming. Speculations have ranged from a complete hoax made to introduce the idea of Amaranthine as a viable trading port to the world at large to tales of a darkspawn civil war between one of the original seven Tevinter Magisters and his underlings. Solas doubted the words of the gossipers that claimed that nothing happened during her rule - one can't miss the looks nobles and commoners alike give to the Arlessa - the people are hers - and such respect is earned, not given.

The ground beneath his feet trembled ominously - she clutched onto his upper arm. The whole city and its surroundings shook for a solid minute and in that time, its occupants below went about their day as if they could not feel the earthquake. They walk along the sepia-toned cobblestone underneath a sepia-toned sky. A traveler at heart - she will make the journey no matter the distance - it is why everything seems so close and reachable. It is why even in this version of her Arling, he could still see in the west the sickly green glow from the remnants of a closed Breach even though the Temple of Sacred Ashes was a good week's journey away. A sudden clarity bloomed in her grey eyes as she glanced about in alarm, "Are we... Are we dreaming?" The mark of the rift crackled with sudden ferocity; her pendant flickered an ethereal red. Mythal... His throat tightened and for the first time since he woke from uthenera, he wanted to howl. "Is this your dream or mine? I feel you here but I doubt you've ventured to the arling to know what it looks like."

"I directed the Fade's energies toward your subconscious - this realm thrives upon a mind like yours." The strange logic that dictated conversations in dreams meant that he could have gotten away with somewhat vague answers, "The Fade reflects you - this is where you call home or should I say," he gestured towards Vigil's Keep and then to the horizon where Skyhold and the Frostback Mountains seemed to loom ever closer, "homes. I'm pleasantly surprised by your attention to detail."

She frowned in consternation, "But there's not enough green."
"It's your Fade. You control its properties including its color palette." The world trembled again and again, no dream entity took note. The wind began to whisper in elvish by his ears, a hissing, malevolent, revenge driven voice that he had grown accustomed to during his quest to reactivate ancient elven artifacts scattered throughout the lands. "We should wake up." We will wake up soon, whether you wished to or not." I sense that Corypheus is near." More importantly, Solas heard his orb calling for him - casting nonverbal instructions in a bid to be retrieved by its rightful owner. We wait in the realm outside of yours. Wolf. We are coming.

You must wake up.

He woke up and was instantly on his feet, staff held at ready position as Amell stirred at his feet, fingers pulling at the patchwork blanket beneath her. A mild bout of heady dizziness washed over his head, sending a rush of blood downward as he blinked out spots from his vision. She jerked her head away from the still burning incense that stuck out of a small makeshift mound of sand - lavender and Felandaris, used to treat insomniac patients by inducing an artificial deep sleep. "What?" She groggily murmured as she struggled to stand, staring over Solas's head, "I... Oh." Under her breath, she let loose a long string of curses as frost slowly radiated from beneath her feet.

Among the low slope of the pass where they stood, Skyhold behind them and the clear ice river stretching down toward the Temple of Sacred Ashes before them, the mountain side began to disintegrate. Boulders the size of rooms ripped from the bedrock started to float, bobbling slightly in a predetermined position in the air as if they were drifting on the ocean, faintly glowing green with fade magic, his magic, his stolen magic (- but it wasn't stolen, it was willingly given, wasn't it?) The rocks drew nearer. His magic beckoned for him. We're here. Come back to us. Fen'Harel,

"It's yours." He spun around, words dying in his throat when he saw the horror in Amell's eyes. Her glowing pendant illuminated her face in a vibrant red, casting sharp angles over her features - its power had been augmented. Mythal must have innervated her own protection. When? Just before they shared a dream? Just before she had chased him down for an explanation? Why would Mythal do this? Perhaps the enhancement increased her sensitivity even more towards elven magics? Far more than a human could ever dream of... Did Mythal wish for Amell to know about him? What good will it bring? So many questions, so little answers. Funny how he was now the ignorant one of the pair. In the distance, the silhouette of the Elder One, holding his (mine) orb between elongated claws, red lyrium magic erupting from his hands, dual beams of tainted power aimed towards the lingering scar of the breach in the sky. "That artifact is yours. It's a wolf. How..."

He froze. She continued to stare at him with an expression that he recalled seeing once before in his long lifespan: the final moments of Mythal's betrayal. In a way, he was responsible for both situations. "Run." Mythal had whispered.

"Did Corypheus find it?" Amell anxiously pressed as her mana started to whip around her in preparation for battle. The rest of her Inner Circle, as small as ants, were beginning to make their ways down towards their position, weapons in hand, "Did he steal it from you?" We have not felt you since before your Uthenara. You could not even unlock your own powers. But you are powerful enough now. "... Did you give it to him?" He turned away - breaths growing more shallow in his panic. Did Mythal's blessing gift her with an ability to understand magic on a more coherent level instead of mere emotions or was she that perceptive? Granted, he had dropped many hints, accidentally or in an attempt to teach her his ways, during their travels together. But he feared her reaction... Whatever she saw on his face had her drawing in a sharp breath, "You gave your power to him." Her tone was knowing and accusing. "Fen'Harel's ability to..." Fen'Harel the kin of both the Creators and the Forgotten Ones. Fen'Harel the god of betrayal. "Solas." So many emotions were compacted into that one word. Solas, answer me. Solas did you enable him? Solas, were you responsible for so many deaths? Solas, how could you?
She reached for him. He bolted.

"Solas!"
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

And so is the Golden City blackened
With each step you take in my Hall.
Marvel at perfection, for it is fleeting.
You have brought Sin to Heaven
And DOOM UPON ALL THE WORLD.

—Canticle of Threnodies 8:13

Amell

The fact that she didn't even blink twice at the scene: floating boulders moving erratically through the air, into the clouds, slamming onto the ground and leaving behind clouds of dirt and craters the size of cottages: should hint at the amount of bizarre events she had experienced and shaped her perception of the world. Her more inquisitive mind was irked from the lack of opportunities to conduct experiments in this environment: did the magic of the Fade account for each object's center of mass? If she walked to the edge of the uneven platform, toes dangling over the side, will the magic accommodate her weight or spin from the sudden change in physical property?

Focus... Amell peered down and watched as a handful of soil and grass, clumps of blades and roots, crumbled off the side. The larger pieces bounced off of ledges, down the steep slopes that bordered the Temple of Sacred Ashes, halting at the boots of many an Inquisition soldier - either dead or knocked conscious; it was hard to judge from this distance. She swallowed heavily and made a running leap to the next closest slab (it held a tree like some over-sized potted plant - she was fairly impressed) just as a wave of magic pulverized the one she had stood on a second ago into fine ash. She wrapped her arms around the trunk as she ascended, hissing in displeasure as the mark in her hand sparked angrily. She passed Iron Bull flanking a Pride Demon while Blackwall kept it distracted and Cassandra keeping a group of shades paralyzed while Cole picked them off one by one, a glint of metal behind their necks.

She ducked behind the tree as dual beams of red lyrium, courtesy of Corypheus, slammed against the wood, carving grooves the size of her head into the bark, and countered with a blast of ice that froze him for a precious second. In that one second, Sera and Varric unleashed a hail of arrows that crackled with Dorian's lightning. Vivienne arced her spirit blade above her head and weaved a barrier around the melee fighters who converged onto Corypheus just as the frost that trapped him started to fracture. And then, in the next second, he was gone, teleported, again, out of range, onto higher ground.

Morrigan, scales matching the hue of her hair, underbelly that of her skin, eyes taking on the characteristic slits of a dragon, wrestled with her red lyrium counterpart, aiming repeated blasts of fire into its face. Up close, Corypheus's dragon did not wield the sinister air that Amell had attributed to Urthemiel the Archdemon; its Taint was superficial - an imitation at best, a mockery at worst. Locking claws, Morrigan screeched in rage, folding her wings as she tumbled down and down and down... Amell sucked in a breath and narrowed her eyes - this battle had gone on long enough.
The air was thin, the peaks of the Frostback Mountains far below, Skyhold was visible in the
distance - she gritted her teeth and wiped hair and sweat off of her forehead. Instead of that rush of
fear that had gripped her in Haven (an entire army converging upon an undefended little town - at
the helm was the Elder One who had orchestrated the tragedy at the Conclave - how could one not
feel slight trepidation?), faint annoyance bristled along her psyche - she couldn't even dredge up the
effort to be awed by the mimic of the Fade realm that Corypheus had formed and decided to vocalize
her thoughts. The Tevinter Magister was obviously a creature of Pride: he breathed pride, he was
awashed in pride, pride was his ultimate downfall. When all else fails, hit your enemy with words at
soft, vulnerable areas where it would hurt.

"Running away, aren't we?" Instead of the mocking loudness that she had treated Magister Erimond
with, she kept her tone mild - like Leliana when she maneuvered from noble to noble in Halamshiral,
whispering death, blackmail, and idle comments of the weather all in the same breath. "You don't
rank anywhere near the top of the most challenging opponents I've ever had to face." A half truth - a
woman of her caliber having to join a military organization to successfully pick off parts of his army
did indicate that he had started, at least, as an threatening entity, capable of destroying the world.
Now...?

Despite his pathetic state, he could not help but let the words move him, "You dare to speak to a god
in such an insolent manner?" Dispelling his entropic cloud, Amell grinned gamely back as they
traded bursts of elemental fire. "I diminished your forces, halving them in Haven and again in the
battlegrounds of Dumat's rage. Did you forget clashing blades with your own trusted men and
women under my thrall?" Her smile quickly faded. No, she did not forget the faces of her people up
close, mouth partly open as blood dribbled from the corners when she stabbed through their rib
cages, angling in toward the heart to ensure quick deaths. Her nightmares would not allow her to
forget. In addition to her wardens deceived, she also must contend with the memories of other
sacrifices made: Inquisition agents and soldiers, her cousin in the Fade. Her blood wanted to make
him feel as much pain as he had inflicted upon her. I am Elgar'nan's thirst for revenge
humorlessly - Well, I supposed Mythal can make a rival claim for godhood over the aspect,
according to Flemeth.

"You didn't answer my question," her brows furrowed in suspicion. She didn't expect Corypheus to
make any decisive blow: far from it - he was too weak to attack her head first, but he was retreating
more than necessary. Though mad, he was still a high calibre tactician of war. Wiping away a smear
of blood off her cheek with a thumb, she tilted her head as she fade stepped closer, one stepping
stone after another. Just as she reached his position, free hand glowing with fire, he transported
away, but within reach of her Inner Circle. "You're delaying for time," she observed as she beheaded
a rage demon that tried to sneak into her blind spot. "Who are you waiting for?" Morrigan had
battled his dragon to a standstill. (Please Andraste, do not let her be another casualty.) He couldn't be
summoning a demon powerful like that of the Nightmare...

"I am his high priest! I am his most devout worshiper! He has assisted me before!" His mien twisted
in rage as Cassandra's shield bash caused him to stumble. He struck out with a lyrium covered claw
and pillars of fire, tilted his head back and screamed to the empty, green skies. "He promised! The
Golden City would be ours!"

"He isn't going to save you. The City isn't golden. You know that," she thought about the chained
throne and empty shackles, Flemeth standing by a gilded mirror, embodying all of elven motherhood
and justice. (Justice can easily turn into vengeance), the soul of Urthemiel writhing in her hand. Her
head pounded with the beginnings of a Calling-like headache, metaphorical clawed fingers digging
through the crevasses in her mind and leaving behind a sickly grease.

His eyes widened, pupil contracting into pinpoints, and he summoned another platoon of enraged
shades, wave after wave in a seemly never ending flow. Blackwall unleashed a war cry as he stood his ground. The Elder One is starting to doubt. Her pendant whispered as she methodically gutted demon after demon, obscured by Varric's miasma flask. That doubt gives him fear. "Dumat! Ancient ones, I beseech you!" Corypheus cried, pouring his mana into the orb, "If you exist, if you ever truly existed, aid me now!" ...His plea yielded nothing. He is abandoned. Rightfully so. "You..." He turned towards her, a clawed finger outstretched, "You... Warden!" As if the title was the highest insult he could give... but it would be to the High Priest of Dumat, wouldn't it? She was the antithesis of everything he held in regard. Wardens were formed to vanquish the Old Gods. Corypheus revered the Old Gods.

Her pendant heated, blinding hot to the touch: he must be renewing his efforts to possess her body. She shuddered as the sensation of ice crawled down her spine - Mythal's protection glowed brighter. Imagine if he proved successful... She could kiss Flemeth in gratitude. "Why do you keep trying? You will not win." The world does not abide to his wishes for glory. He had emerged into an alien world that hasn't been his since the First Blight. She almost felt sorry for him. Steeling herself, she lashed out with rift magic originating from her palm; he caught the spell and disintegrated it within his hands.

"Ignorant fool, you do not understand the powers you hold!" He hissed as the elven orb hovered in the air just above his head, expelling coiling tendrils of magic, "You are not worthy! The power was meant for me!" She angled her head to the side, ears perking up as... How... But she could've sworn she heard howling underlying Corypheus's chant to further unlock the artifact's power.

"It wasn't meant for you," she corrected him. The power belonged to Solas... Fen'Harel... Who clearly still smarted from the loss. Solas taught her how to close the rifts. Solas taught her how to trust the mark of the rift's instincts and inherent knowledge of Fade magics. Solas was not here, there was only Amell. Her magic reached out to the orb, disrupting Corypheus's incantation - He responded well to the taunt; he's vulnerable. She pulled. "Then again," she mused, "It wasn't meant for me either."

The scar in the sky from the Breach, faint crooked lines crossing clouds, sharply traveling down with a sound akin to thunder echoing in the range every time they spread. She slowly pried the seam apart with her mark until the rift resembled a gaping maw of dimensional geometry, slowly descending atop of Corypheus and his orb. He shrieked, "NO!" wrenching one arm free and hurled a cloud of red, pulsing lyrium to her, driven by fury and desperation. Anchored in her position from her spell and unable to cast further magic for protection, she raised her arms to shield herself from the majority of the attack, bracing herself against thousands of sharp edges digging into her skin. Almost... She mentally chanted as the rift started to form its own vacuum like pull. Almost...

The spinning elven orb suddenly halted its orbit around Corypheus's form and, as if pulled by a third party, flung itself in front of his last attack and, with a flash of green light, formed a barrier around her that absorbed the blow. The Elder One kept screaming - Archaic Tevene, obscenities, curses, denials - his end is not dignified - she couldn't tell, her ears were ringing from the call... No... The howl originating from the rift. Was that? She couldn't see - the light had temporarily blinded her but if she squinted, she could just make out the form of a... wolf? Her pendant responded to the call and shattered - remnants of a one powerful fire opal scattering around them and then... and then, Solas's orb similarly fractured into a million tiny, tiny pieces. "Solas? Flemeth?" She faintly murmured as she stumbled back, (Fen'Harel? Mythal? What... what happened? What was supposed to happen?) as Corypheus was drawn into the rift, (the Abyss - fitting, that...) fighting against the hold tooth and nail until he disappeared behind a closing rift. And then... Silence. And then...

She stared up at the crepuscular skies and admired how the green disintegrated into reds and oranges and yellows - sunset colors. A spell of dizziness overcame her as copper blood from her nosebleed...
dribbled back into her nasal passages and down her throat. "Inquisitor? Inquisitor!" Rubbing her head, smearing her hand with dried blood, she slowly straightened, wincing as muscles and skin protested against the treatment. Tonight was looking to be a elfroot potion bath - she hadn't needed one in a while. Her Inner Circle doggedly crossed through an outcrop of fallen boulders with Cassandra leading the charge. The warrior hadn't looked this worried since she read the contents to the book that held the secrets of the Seekers of Truth. She coughed and cleared her throat, "Is it finally over?" She motioned with her shield towards the spot in the sky, below the feathery cirrus, above the setting sun, where the Elder One had been banished.

Cassandra stood strong, still in full guard, Wrath of Heaven still encasing her in white lights. Varric leaned heavily against Blackwall's shield, nursing a bump on his head, and gloowering at the scenery around him. Iron Bull resembled a veritable waterfall of blood. Sera spat out a loose tooth and curiously tongued the gap in her mouth, much to Vivienne's disgust. Morrigan clutched her ribs and favored her left leg. But they were the worst of the lot - everyone else had the expected minor bruises and bleeding but nothing serious. The Inquisition soldiers that laid about began to stir. All accounted for... Thank the Maker. Amell thought about the pieces of the orb, never to be made whole again. She thought about the rage of the wolf as Flemeth's protection induced the artifact that started this mess to break. Is it finally over? For now. "Yes."

**Cullen**

It had started with an innocuous excursion to the outposts in the Frostbacks where Solas offered Amell a demonstration of dreamer magic. Between reports from scouts stationed in the south pass, the green haze looming over the highest peaks in the direction of the Temple of Sacred Ashes, her Inner Circle rushing to arms and out of the main gates of Skyhold to provide reinforcements, he worked - because it was either that or taking up his shield and sword and heading down there personally to join them, but Leliana had threatened to tie him to his chair because with Skyhold already so low on men, the Inquisition couldn't afford to send anymore. In the middle of enduring the agony of waiting, pacing restlessly among the scant retainers at his side with a note from Knight-Captain Rylen delivered via raven saying that the main body of troops would not be arriving till the evening, cursing himself for not aiding anymore than he was. How long he been waiting as the seconds bled into minutes into hours? And then...

Cassandra was the first to cross through the barbican and announced total victory for the Inquisition. Her words initially stunned her audience. Some complained that the final chapter written of the war against the Elder One was too uninspiring for their tastes, desiring for a more climatic ending. Others, namely those who survived Haven and still held the memories of burning huts, a dragon, and an army of red templars, did not care and, after receiving an affirming nod from from the Inquisitor who was swept away into the care of mage healers, began to cheer and sing. Josephine clapped her hands and announced a celebration to be held in a couple of hours. "Of course, we'll have another more official one in a few weeks for our allies but," she happily exclaimed, "I'd like to take advantage of our high spirits - it would set precedence for coming fetes."

The ambassador became a whirlwind of activity, mobilizing anyone and everyone, even a Ser Barris who had stayed behind when his fellow men and women marched to the Arbor Wilds was seen carting trays of petit fours to the tables in the throne room, perplexed, as if he was wondering how he got himself into such a situation. Cullen found himself barely holding onto his usual outfit, repeatedly patting his furs throughout the course of the party to make sure that the Antivan didn't somehow switch them with formal wear. He cloistered himself by the quartet, engaged in a conversation with his fellow templars and ex-templars. Knight-Captain Rylen arrived just seconds before the music started, bringing with him a new wave of cheers and calls for drinks from Herald's Rest.

"Gave our soldiers a congratulatory talk," Rylen laughed into his cups as the nearby tables erupted
with another rendition of Andraste's Mabari, "Never seen so many grown men and women cry on each other's shoulders." The man winced as his collar rubbed against the recovering sunburn that he had received during his post at Griffon Wing Keep. "I got to hand it to you, Commander, you did good work."

"We did good work," Cullen corrected him as he raised his goblet to his lips as some of the surrounding templars murmured in agreement.

"To Commander Cullen - a man I knew who selflessly aided the rebuilding of Kirkwall after the rebellion, a man more than just his military might," Rylen announced as he leaned heavily against Ser Barris's side, "A diplomat between mages and templars in their most hostile relationship yet - like the elegant Lady Montilyet." The man snickered as he inclined his head toward the Ambassador who was still directing supplies to their respective stations. "Speaking of mages," he muttered as his eyes flickered to the spot over Cullen's left shoulder, "there she is."

With a raised eyebrow, Cullen turned around just as a hush fell over the patrons who stood near the double doors. There she was: walking along the edge of Cassandra's shadow, decked in a warden-blue tunic that had Josephine's fingerprints all over it. The Orlesian nobles bowed reverently, whispering well wishes and prayers. Slowly, the ambient sounds of conversation restarted as Amell bowed to her audience, shaking her head as a few enthusiastic admirers tried to applaud her presence, "Your attention isn't needed; I have no speech. But, thank you. Continue as you were."

As he made his way over from across the call, he caught her eye and, as she smiled back, met her halfway by the mosaic pieces that hung from the south wall. "I can't believe it's over," he greeted, flushing in pleasure when she took her proffered hand without hesitation. "Everyone here..." He had never seen the members of the Inquisition so carefree, enjoying the release of inexplicable tension from their shoulders. Even the dark aura that usually surrounded Leliana seemed softer than normal as she gazed adoringly at Josephine's slippers. "This time - its real? I still can't help but think back to Haven and how our enemy caught us at our most vulnerable." His other arms snaked around her waist, "Maybe I should double check the guard rotations." Amell laughed; he blushed to his roots, "it's a legitimate concern..."

"You're too hard on yourself," she fondly tugged at his hair, "It's a celebration. You can't just start thinking about guard rotations during a celebration, especially one of Josephine's celebrations. She'll cry and you don't want her to cry."

"And this conversation would only fuel the rumors about my workaholic nature," Cullen sighed, bending down as she twirled more of his hair around her finger. "Rumors do have some basis in truth. I try my best to relax with variable success."

"I think you're doing fine. Don't be afraid to indulge a little," she reminded him, squeezing his hand. His eyes searched hers, "Perhaps I will... If you are also willing to try..." He trailed off, trying to gauge her reaction. Her cheeks were red and he could not tell whether it was from his suggestion or from the torchlight. "If you have time? Later?" He rubbed his neck, suddenly bashful and hot under her gaze, "Tonight? Actually, you shouldn't feel obligated if you're too tired, I understand that you just came back and the healers might not have-"

She cut him off by kissing him lightly on the scar above his lip: a peck that conveyed... His eyes fluttered shut - he felt lightheaded, like an aristocrat who was about be overcome by the vapors. "Oh Cullen. If you don't think about your workload and actually enjoy this event like you are meant to, as a man who deserves the recognition," she murmured, a thumb lightly tracing his jugular; his pulse jumped, "Will you look for me in my quarters later?" Her questioning tone was laced with a bit a shyness. He swallowed heavily as she drew away, suppressing the need to pull her back and... No,
they were in public - indecent would be the kindest word for his urges.

"I can do that."

He watched in avid fascination as she turned her gaze away, chewing her lower lip that was already dark and swollen, "I'll wait for you. Until then, enjoy your Orlesian admirers." And she let go and was gone, her presence quickly replaced by a crowd of painted faces that eagerly swarmed around him. With a strained smile (his armor felt too constricting), carefully maneuvering his back to the wall, he answered their inquiries as best as he could and fended off the more personal questions until Rylen and Varric, with drinks in hand, pushed through the crowd and loudly asked for a private audience related to Inquisition matters. The group scattered. Sighing in relief and adjusting his cuffs, Cullen thanked them and accepted a glass.

"May I congratulate you, Commander?" Rylen grinned, pupils dilated from copious amounts of liquor, "Not many of us thought that you would be able to find this sort of happiness or that she would even have you." He leaned in and confided with wiggling eyebrows, "Most of us thought that you were a bit of a stick in the mud."

Cullen glared as he sipped, which only drew a bigger grin from his companions, "I suppose I should commend you on keeping quiet about my personal affairs up until this point." He gave a pointed stare to the dwarf who had both of his hands raised, "Unlike some, whose snide hints I've had to endure since day one."

Varric sheepishly rubbed his nose as Rylen broke out into loud guffaws, "Don't be like that Curly, you're acting like you aren't going to get some tonight." Cullen sputtered into his wine; Rylen gave him a heart slap on the back. "We didn't hear anything, per say - but honestly? The looks you two gave each other are perfect material for a new serial - one that would match Seeker's tastes in literature."

The conversation gravitated towards sharing little anecdotes of farmers, families, townspeople and children that they had met in their travels. Varric weaved his tales effortlessly: the hapless caravan that tried and failed to climb up the cliffs of the Storm Coast, the village girl's bouquet gift that had Blackwall falling into a sneezing fit that lasted for days, the young blacksmith that cultivated a lasting friendship with a giant of the Emerald Graves, and so on. Cullen found himself impatiently fidgeting as the minutes and hours crawled past and the quartet transitioned from lively ballads to low-key nocturnes. Finally, as the conductor bowed with a flourish of his baton to an appreciative audience who asked for a third encore, Cullen excused himself to his colleagues amid suggestive leers and quickly exited the chamber.

The moment the door to her quarters clicked shut behind him and the sounds of activity and revelry dying into a dull roar, he closed his eyes and took a moment to breathe. He climbed the stairs two steps at a time, running a nervous hand through his hair. He stopped at the top newel... Just a couple days ago, he had dropped by to hand over some plans to expand the Inquisition's presence in the Hissing Wastes. This visit's intent is not at all professional. Cullen willed the heat in his skin to pass.

The room was richly furnished. The decorative rugs bearing the eye and the sword were plush beneath his feet. A velvet covered divan sat at the foot of a four poster bed canopy of maple and silk; beyond that, her desk situated in the corner, a chaotic frenzy of papers, pens, and books. A lute, a gift from the Spymaster, perched innocently in the corner. Imported Antivan curtains of royal purple and blue partly obscured the window balcony and her silhouette against the quickly darkening sky.

When he was close enough, just a foot away, Cullen wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling into the crook of her neck as he felt her lightly jump under his touch from surprise. The sun's rays peaked out from the mountains, coloring the snow peaks in soft pink and orange. He slowly exhaled, breath
ghosting over her skin and creating goosebumps; she shivered. "I hope you weren't waiting for too long."

She leaned back as his arms tightened, "Not too long. Were you?"

"It felt like an eternity," he murmured as he worked his hand through her hair, untying the ribbons that weaved through long black stands so that they would flow freely past her shoulders and down her back.

"Such a melodramatic statement - At least you're not waiting any longer." She turned in his arms and kissed him; the small pushes from her hands against his shoulders growing insistent until he started taking steps back without breaking away, trusting her to guide him to the bed. She grinned at him, fingers lightly touching the front of his breastplate, "Did you lock the door?"

"Yes, I did," with a hand on her cheek, he kissed her again just as the back of his knees hit the edge of the mattress; he pulled her loosened collar past her shoulders and took a moment to marvel at the sudden bare expanse of skin, trying to sort his befuddled thoughts through a haze of lust, "But would it matter? The last time we tried this, we learned that even a locked door doesn't give us much privacy. If we're fast we might.."

"I remember that and I took care of it." She shrugged off her shirt with deliberate slowness, letting it pool at her waist, and started playing with the clasps that held his armor together as she slid into his lap. "I had Leliana clear your schedule for the remaining of the night. She explicitly ordered your people to not look for or disturb you until the next morning." ...Well, if that was the case, then he could take his time and make her beg for... Smiling in delight from the news, his fingers danced along the underside of her breasts, "She... Ahh, Cullen, that feels... She even recruited the talents of Rylen and Barris to her side to make sure that we aren't interrupted. I owe her a... But... Maker-" She moaned as his fingers traveled lower, voice become breathless and soft, "You tease... I should - I should probably stop talking about Leliana, shouldn't I?"

He fell back, pulling her on top of him, "Anything else," Cullen agreed, closing his eyes as she lowered her lips to his neck, "Or-" she snaked an arm around his neck and pressed against him, "we can both stop talking altogether." She hummed in assent.

Leliana

Out of the entire list of suitable candidates that could replace her as the new Spymaster of the Inquisition made by her fellow advisors, there was only one that she could simultaneously trust to be faithful to the organization and competently fill her intimidating shoes: Zevran Arainai. "Zevran?" Amell parroted with a look that conveyed her surprise and amusement, "Our Zevran?" She clarified as she tug at the reigns of the stubborn Greater Nuggalope that held the bulk of their supplies.

Leliana cooed at the animal as it snorted and regally tossed its head back. "I am not acquainted with any other Zevran." Granted the man would be a strange choice, but was it really so surprising that she could think of no one better? Her most closest friends were made during that year of travels battling the Fifth Blight, and Zevran, despite his less than glamorous introduction into the wardens' party, was included in the lot.

Lips still twitching, Amell gazed skyward, as if the clouds held a proper reply that didn't include outright laughing. "Spymaster Zevran would work differently than Spymaster Leliana," she chose her words carefully, "I'm trying to imagine how he'll make it work, no doubt he will in his own special Zevran way. Just think, he'll wish for all the scouts to be equipped with elven leather boots and the enlistment would read - Hey... No chewing..." Leliana glanced up in confusion as the other
woman's tone changed from glee to horror and giggled at the entertaining sight before her.

The mount had taken upon itself to start nibbling at the edge of a painting of Leliana's ascension into the seat of power in the Chantry. A corner had begun to free itself from the rest of the pack, squeezing between ropes and bindings, and hung off its flank. Annoyed at the unequal distribution of weight, the nuggalope had tried to adjust its burdens by eating the offending item, peeling its lips back to reveal an impressive set of molars when Amell yanked the canvas out of its mouth. Pinching the edges between a forefinger and thumb, staring in dismay at the saliva dripping from the sides, Amell made a disgusted face as Leliana burst into peels of laughter.

"Ten days of work by the best portrait artist in all of Ferelden!" Alistair made a grand sweep with his arm at the depiction that hung from the stone walls like a tapestry, no doubt a practiced move trained into him when he began his rule as King. He wore ermine furs over noble clothing of purple dyed king's willow weave, slightly ruffled from a day's work sitting with his council that shined in the window light as he proudly straightened with hands resting on his hips. "What do you think?"

Her likeness was evident in the high cheekbones, the arrow in her gloved hand, the harshness in her eyes from years of walking within the shadows, and the nug that was perched on the banner that held her new name. "You had a nug drawn in just for me?"

Though the history books' depictions of the Chantry's divine always included small accents that differentiated one Divine from another, perhaps this illustration took one too many liberties. Having a nug drawn for Leliana would be akin to having a bookcase of *Swords and Shields* in the background of Cassandra's portrait had she been the one voted in the new leader of the Chantry.

Alistair glanced between her and Amell who seemed to be just barely holding back the many witticisms that rested on tip of her tongue. The wardens shared a grin that young children traded when in pursuit of mischievous undertakings, "I had to convince the poor man that he wouldn't be punished from the deviation from usual Chantry stiffness. I'm of the opinion that one nug is not enough. Perhaps thirty."

Amell's eyes grew wide as her hand flew over her smiling mouth, "The Chantry is already trying to find ammunition against Leliana, this will be their strangest yet. Any more nugs and the Grand Clerics will start questioning her proclivities in a manner not befit for the innocent ears of this room." Leliana made a noise at the back of her throat as she swatted the woman over the head for her cheek, her other hand reaching out to grab at Alistair's ear. Alistair yelped and pulled away, making the face of a wounded mabari as he tried to rub the redness out of his skin.

"The damage has already been done," he told his companions with mock grandiose, "You should have seen Arl Eamon's face when I told him that I intended to unveiled the final product to an audience in the center square of Halamshiral." He cleared his throat and pitched his voice to that of the elder man, "Your Majesty... I cannot. It is a fine work befitting for our Most Holy but that thing... it has hands, Your Majesty. It handles things." He and Amell traded off mocking impressions of various Ferelden nobilities as Leliana sighed and turned her attention back upon the artwork. In all honesty, she loved the gift and she loved the fact that the entire Chantry will have to either appreciate or suffer the image (after all, if she couldn't punish her dissenters through blood, then she will make them endure harmless torture that will no more than have them develop a lasting twitch underneath their eyes).

*It is only a true friend who would commission your Divine portrait to be one that would*
"- Zevran would probably direct the Inquisition resources to the north where the Antivan Crows lie and take over the house. The Inquisition would have the solid backings of three countries." Amell mused as Leliana roused from her reverie. "It's like we couldn't help but become embroiled in plans for world domination." She frowned slightly, wringing her hands, "Zevran would move quickly - there's lots of world to cover - and he'll be flamboyant about it too, flirting with anyone and everyone." Her frown disappeared as she adopted his breathy dialect, "Ah! My dear, beautiful warden! It has been ages since I've last gazed upon your mien and thought of your-"

"On second thought," Leliana cringed, "I will shelve his candidacy for the time being."

"Why not? I'm beginning to warm up to the idea," Amell chortled as she rubbed her hands together and narrowly ducked a low hanging branch, "Can you imagine him meeting the rest of the crew? Cassandra? Sera? The initial introductions would be hysterical." Her voice merged with the background ambiance of the Hinterlands as she continued talking, as Leliana pictured the shenanigans that the Antivan elf would get into. Josephine would be happy to meet a fellow Antivan despite the man's quirks. Still, Zevran would fit oddly well with the menagerie of people that Amell had collected.

But Zevran was a member of the original eight companions that Amell had dragged along across Ferelden to fight the Fifth Blight and to each of the companions, she shared something special: confectioneris and candles with Sten, songs and dances with Leliana, memories of the Circle and wine with Wynne, so on and so forth. With Zevran, she shared stories and touches - hugs, kisses on the nose, forehead, and cheeks - gestures that could easily be mistaken for something more than platonic affection. Cullen, even if the special circumstances were explained to him, would probably be sulking about the battlements of Skyhold, moody with jealousy. A silly reaction: he has nothing to fear concerning his relationship with her, not since...

The wood polish smoothed across the tables smelled of fresh pine resin. They would be worn off by the months end and never reapplied. Amell had tried to push a handful of soverigns into Cabot's unwilling hand, "To commemorate the grand opening," she had cajoled, "Andraste has mercy, accept the money, you stubborn dwarf!" The bartender had told her that this would be the first and last time the newly declared Inquisitor would pay within Herald's Rest before serving her glass after glass of his finest beverages. That was how Leliana found her, an hour later, mildly tipsy and staring at the grain pattern in the table, as if unsure whether to be happy or sad.

Leliana slid into the seat across from her and motioned to Cabot for a glass of wine, "I thought you'd be happier than this and not so despondent. You looked so hopeful when you left the throne room with the Commander to the outer walls." When Leliana had offered the man time and space to ask for a chance of courtship, she didn't not expect him to bungle his attempt so badly and have his love interest look so lost.

"He said he loved me," Amell stated blankly after a few seconds of thought, as if she could not register those words, "I didn't... Since when?"

...Oh. So Cullen was not at fault - good to know that she wouldn't be putting the fear of the Maker into her fellow advisor. She grew quite fond of the man. Leliana resisted the urge to roll her eyes and comment exasperatedly about Amell's high perception of people but low perception on people's interest in her in a romantic sense. Instead, she nursed her wine and ruefully stared at the cuticles of her nails as she entertained various replies within her head as Amell buried her fingers into her scalp. Since when? Since he
first saw you in the Haven Chantry - but he was too scared to act upon it.

"Andraste’s flaming sword... I let him hold me in his office. I kissed him in Haven," she moaned, digging the heel of her palms into her eyes, cheeks pinkening beyond the initial flush from the alcohol she had imbibed.

Leliana unsympathetically clucked her tongue, "You wanted to." It seemed that of all the pilgrims, visitors, dignitaries, soldiers, scouts, and new friends that graced the Inquisition’s steps, it was only Leliana who observed the slow transition from Amell's friendship to Amell's affection. Granted, the infatuation was barely hinted: lingering glances at the Commander when he sparred with his men, straying even longer when he wrestled without a shirt in the crisp air, the guilt that came soon after - longing for something she thought she didn't have, for what good would it come from desiring a man who once feared and hated her magic-wielding kind when she should be pathetically grateful for the mere amiable hand extended her way? So Amell stayed silent as the flame within her continued to burn; but there were times when she slipped, often when she spoke to the Commander himself - a fleeting expression would pass over her face sometimes when she locked eyes with the man, as if she was seeing him for the first time and caught a glimpse of something beautiful.

"Should I have?" Amell mumbled face down on the table, pressing her burning cheek against the wood, "There is an ache within me that I didn't want to keep hidden if I were to die. But I can't describe the feeling with mere words." Leliana leaned over and consolingly rubbed her back. "I thought it was just me... But what if it is just him? What if I don't actually..."

Leliana shook her head - she does: she just does not recognize the feeling. "Do you love him?" When Amell helplessly shrugged, eyes still glazed and staring into the far distance, Leliana pressed further. "Can you imagine yourself at his side? Waking up to his face day after day? Can you imagine yourself bedding him?" Amell paused; she looked down at her lap and flushed harder, a small tongue involuntarily darting out to wet her lips. Leliana resisted the urge to grin, "At least attraction isn’t a problem. You already know him well. You won't do yourself any favors to him or yourself if you don't try." Outside the window by the training dummies, the man himself was monitoring the training of green recruits, frowning as he made notations on his clipboard. "You know what you have with him didn’t spring from nothing. Otherwise, you wouldn't have given him anything."

Amell followed her gaze, eyes alighting upon the man who was in a conversation with Cassandra, eyes softening when he threw his head back and laughed, "Right... You're right. You've always have been. I'll try."

"Zevran needs a place to stay and call home," Amell picked at the stray threads of her scarf, a furrow growing between her brows from worry, "He sounds so weary over the letters. We can offer him that much, even if he is not to be the new Spymaster."

Leliana halted in her tracks so suddenly that the nuggalope lurched back; Amell craned her neck back, eyes wide in alarm. Leliana quickly gathered the remains of her composure as her thoughts raced. It had been so long since her worries about Amell's future, of whether she would stay with the Inquisition or return to the wardens. There was that letter from Warden-Constable Howe sending his Commander off with well wishes like a bride with a dowry but Amell had always been a free spirit and was careful in her way with words. She does not use that word loosely. To call something so permanent... "Skyhold," Leliana ventured, allowing a bit of hope to leak into her voice, "is home?"
Amell blinked twice, "Yes." Then she drew back, surprised by her own admission - as if she didn't realize that she had, within the past year, made a safe dwelling for herself within the snow capped peaks of the Frostback Mountains. Leliana could almost read the other woman's mind through her obvious consternation painted across her face. *When did Skyhold become home? First with the Wardens, now with the Inquisition... Burrowing into your heart without noticing, growing root beneath the earth, latching onto your unsuspecting heart. A home is a place to return to. Yes... This is home.* Amell waved an arm to the horizon where the path turned into the pass, where a fort sat waiting for the two of them, welcoming them with opened gates, and nodded decisively. "Skyhold is home, Leliana. We are going home."

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